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ASPECTS OF MODERNISM

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FROM WILDE
TO PIRANDELLO

BY
JANKO LAVRIN

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To the Memory of my Friend
A. R. ORAGE

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J. L.

PREFATORY NOTE

NOTHING is more hackneyed and yet more vague than the words "modern" and "modernism". This is why they should be used with caution. In the following essays they stand for the advanced type of consciousness and sensibility, in so far as these are reflected in literature.

The "new" European sensibility can easily be traced back to the romantic movement and even farther. In its strict sense, however, it comprises the last four or five decades. It was romanticism that introduced—in contrast to the universal and generalized values of the classicist literature—the subjective or personal element as such. And this element had to pass through an involved process before it reached, in some representative "moderns", the height of its crisis. ✓

Owing to the numerous facets of the latter, modernism comprises trends and groups which seem to have little in common on the surface, although fundamentally they may have a common source. Utter atomization of the individual, and parallel with this, a passionate though impotent will to achieve at least some balance and harmony in spite of all—such are

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the two polar trends reflected in European modernism as a whole. And between these two poles one finds a countless variety of writings illustrating our contemporary restlessness, social and individual disintegration, lack of faith, anxious quest, hope, despair, or else compromise and evasion. The variety is so great indeed that it excludes beforehand any generalization. The only thing one can do is to portray a number of European authors and let their works speak, not only for themselves, but also for their epoch.

This book comprises a series of portraits typifying a few of such aspects and tendencies. It completes, in a way, some of my other books, especially *Studies in European Literature*. A further volume, dealing almost exclusively with the younger post-war writers, is in preparation.

J. L.

ON OSCAR WILDE

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I

OSCAR WILDE reminds one of those people by whom one is impressed on a first acquaintance only to revise one's hasty admiration at each successive meeting. After a repeated perusal of his works one even feels annoyed to find in them so much wit at the expense of wisdom, so much liveliness at the expense of life, and so much sparkling artifice at the expense of art. He may have happy flashes of intuition; he may teem with paradoxes some of which glitter like darts made of crystal; and yet, the more one admires his skill and superficial charm the more one begins to suspect that while being brilliantly right in trifles, he is perhaps no less brilliantly wrong in essentials. In the end one cannot avoid querying, why a man, endowed with great artistic talent and temperament, should fail to be truly great either in art or in life, and remain an amateur in both.

His lack of character, of a virile creative backbone, provides only a partial explanation. It throws a light upon his eclecticism, his Epicurean toying with important matters, and also upon his cult of the surface. Further clues, or at least some of them, can be gleaned however in the general "decadent" atmosphere of

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the *fin de siècle*, which found in Wilde one of its votaries and victims.

That atmosphere, so conspicuous in the advanced literature of the period, can best be described as romanticism without convictions. We find in it all the features of romantic mentality—hand in hand with a complete lack of a romantic faith. It was the romanticism which had passed—with various mishaps—through a sober positivist, materialistic and sceptical age on the one hand, and through the *roman expérimental* of Zola on the other. If the romantic aversion to reality led, about a century earlier, to the affirmation of one's subjective Ego with all its fancies, caprices and emotions, this Ego now hardly knew what to do with itself in order not to go to pieces. Undermined by "scientific" determinism (heredity, environment, economic factors) or else analysed away as a bundle of appetites, impressions and sensations without any permanent kernel, it saw itself threatened from without and from within. Little wonder that its modern diehards entrenched themselves behind the damaged romantic walls where they fought for the Ego—chiefly by means of an exaggerated, hysterical egotism.

Their self-exaltation was not a sign of faith or strength. It came from fear. Therefore it increased at the same rate as the impending danger. But the tension soon reached a point beyond which it could

not go: the Ego either had to transcend itself, or else beat a hasty retreat to its last "decadent" shelters. Failing in both, it ran the risk of turning against itself and disintegrating, in spite of all the efforts to keep it together.

II

It is instructive to follow the aspects of this fight for the Ego on the part of modern consciousness. Baudelaire, for example, found a relief even in the conceited exclusiveness of his own personal vices, which he endeavoured to make as different from those of the despised *bourgeois* as possible. Or take Nietzsche—that decadent genius who tried to cure himself through his own philosophy of the superman, and yet plunged from his Zarathustrian heights into the maniacal egotism of his *Ecce Homo*, suggestive of the lunatic asylum as the next stage. The more passive "decadents" hoped to get out of the *cul-de-sac* (like some of their romantic predecessors a few decades earlier) through a second-hand mysticism, or even through a timely surrender to the authority of the Roman-Catholic Church. Others hurried to turn beauty itself into a kind of religion. Others again thought they would find salvation in a new return to the "fundamentals" of life, or in the mystery of Sex (Rozanov, and in our days, D. H. Lawrence).

If the romantic trend opened up, at the beginning of the last century, new regions in man and in art, the modern sensibility—at the end of it—explored some of those regions in their most inaccessible corners. And as the new contents, discovered there, could only be rendered by means of a new literary technique, the last two decades of the nineteenth century produced a veritable revolution in this respect. And the authors who had to face the fiercest conflicts within themselves (such as Nietzsche, and before him Rimbaud) were often among the most daring reformers of style and language.

Alongside such fighters one finds, however, a number of their understudies who knew how to adopt, or even to perfect, modern methods without much quest and travail. The inevitable literary camp followers, whose name is legion, do not count of course. But apart from these, each important movement produces individuals who possess a pliable artistic temperament without the inner wealth of great creative artists. Divorcing expression from experience, they are derivative. But at their best they show enough refinement, taste, and a kind of sterile polish, to make one forget even their lack of originality. In this sense, and mainly in this sense, Oscar Wilde is one of the most striking representatives of the “decadent” period in modern literature. Although not significant as a creator, he is important as a symp-

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tom. And, paradoxically, his importance would seem to be greater for the Continent than for England.

III

In spite of his coquettish individualism and his shower of paradoxes, which makes one think of Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde is the very antipodes of the philosopher of superman. Nietzsche wrote in order to fight and to overcome his inner tragedy; Wilde—in order to avoid it. He was deliberately anti-tragic. From art he demanded an æsthetic shelter; and from life, hardly anything more than pleasantly arranged appearances, coupled with an Epicurean chase after new sensations for their own sake.

“It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances,” says his mouthpiece, Lord Henry, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible. . . . Don’t squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideal, of our age. Live, live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. A new hedonism—that is what our century wants. . . .” Acting upon this advice, his disciple Dorian naturally decides “never to accept any theory or

system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience", and to concentrate only "upon the moments of life that is in itself but a moment".

Life thus chopped into its "impressionist" moments and slices may however lose its inner thread, its direction. Instead of self-realization, we obtain only that self-indulgence which is in essence a continuous flight from one's self—a flight towards the vacuum. The danger increases when this vacuum is screened with æsthetic decorations and becomes the object of a cult indulged in with the charm of a literary man about town such as Oscar Wilde. Unhampered by any ethical values and lacking at the same time a strong creative urge, Wilde put his artistic temperament at the service either of sensuality pure and simple, or else of that decorative eclecticism of his which was responsible for the numerous influences one can trace in his works: from pre-Raphaelitism (via Ruskin and particularly Walter Pater) to the witty *drame social*; from Swinburne to Baudelaire; from Andersen to Maeterlinck (in *Salomé*) and Huysmans.

Yet whatever he touched he imbued not only with his superficial elegance, but also with his wit and humour. For if ever there was a mortal endowed with both, it was Oscar Wilde, although in the end he failed to do justice to his humour and developed his

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wit at the expense of it. True sense of humour consists not in *bons mots*, in jokes, or in witty repartee, but in that serene and yet essentially serious attitude towards life which is "superficial out of profundity", and therefore enables one to play with everything—including one's own seriousness. If irony is at its strongest against a background of vacuum which one resents, humour is at its best when it plays with the actualities of life because they are considered irrelevant in comparison with the higher value of life. Once we divorce life from the value of life and dismiss the latter as something irrelevant, our humour passes into witty flippancy and paradoxical juggling, as it did, and most amusingly so, in the case of Oscar Wilde. Devoid of depth, he probably never tasted of the profound joys of life; and yet he was brimming over with the carefree gaiety of a literary Alcibiades, or of a *boulevardier* of Parnassus, by whom the Muses themselves were the more fascinated the less seriously he seemed to take them.

IV

Oscar Wilde's gaiety was not a victory over earnestness, but an escape from it. It was the gaiety of a light-hearted spendthrift of talent, of mind and money, who lived beyond his means with regard to all three. His clever sophistry veils at times almost too thinly his hidden indifference to everything except

his "sensations" and that narcissism of his which urged him to shine, to be always the centre of attention, and to admire himself through other people's admiration.

This was perhaps one of the reasons why he remained, even in his writings, first of all a matchless talker, with a real or imaginary audience before him. And he knew how to twist his sentences and ideas in so dexterous a way as to make them look plausible even when they were not convincing at all. "To test Reality we must see it on the tight rope; when Verities become acrobats we can judge them," he says. But what he himself cares about is mainly the tight-rope itself on which he performs his acrobatic tricks and shows off his skill, so abundant in his *Intentions*, for example, and also in his plays, one of which (*The Importance of Being Earnest*) ranks among the most amusing modern comedies. His plots and themes may be conventional. The dialogue is at times overladen with epigrams, but it is never dull. Combining the imported French *esprit* with his own Irish vivacity, and fun with epigrammatic fireworks, Wilde knows how to be enjoyable even when one is least inclined to agree with him.

Like Bernard Shaw he, too, turns accepted truths and ideas inside out, not because they are wrong, but mainly because they are accepted. Yet while Shaw frequently impedes the artist by the pathos of

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a ridiculing reformer who "knows better", Oscar Wilde prefers to display through his own art the carefree naughtiness of an eternal *gamin*. For alongside the "eternal feminine", or even the eternal old-maidish (in both sexes), there is also such a thing as the eternal boyish. Some of its elements come out in Wilde and perhaps in d'Annunzio. Both of them give the impression of volatile self-infatuated boys, with the difference that d'Annunzio is entirely devoid of humour, and therefore takes some of his roles with a grandiose solemnity which would be unthinkable in Wilde.

V

The very charm of Oscar Wilde was thus due, partly at least, to the fact that he could never take seriously either himself or his own work. Even when attacking he did so as if he were only playing: the more he pricked the less he seemed to wound. His onslaughts on Victorian snobbery were malicious enough at times; but they mattered to him mainly as a pretext for fun and laughter. And the only "message" he really cared for was that mixture of hedonism and æstheticism which suited best his own character, or lack of character. What he was most afraid of was actual life, whose claims he tried to avoid under the excuse of ugliness, of vulgarity and absence of form. So there remained nothing for

him but to embrace and to perfect that "æsthetic" gospel which puts Art before life, above life, and—if necessary—even against life.

"As civilization progresses and we become more highly organized, the elect spirits of each age, the critical and cultured spirits, will grow less and less interested in actual life and will seek to gain their impressions almost entirely from what Art has touched. For life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. There is a grotesque horror about its comedies, and its tragedies seem to culminate in a farce. One is always wounded when one approaches it. . . . Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. It is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament. It makes us pay too high a price for its wares, and we purchase the meanest of its secrets at a cost that is monstrous and infinite."

This passage from *Intentions* shows, not only Wilde's hidden fear of actuality, but also his aversion to life and nature in their unadulterated aspects. His æsthetic scruples (most of them self-imposed) went so far that he washed his lips after having kissed his enceinte wife—a feat of which he afterwards boasted to Frank Harris. Conceiving Art mainly as

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a decorative contrast to life and reality, he defined it as a spirited protest against the crudities of Nature; as "our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place".

The result was a definite "art for art's sake" which seemed to dismiss the fact that Nature, too, can be as beautiful (on her own plane) as any work of art. It also reduced the variety and the aspects of beauty to one plane only: that of art as formulated by the aesthetes and the beauty-mongers. One step further, and the dogmatic "art for art's sake" passes into "life for art's sake", trying to turn life itself into art. One accepts living life only in so far as it can be forced on to the Procrustean bed of æsthetic dogmas and decorative stylizations.

VI

This may perhaps be inevitable in an age in which art has ceased to be an organic function of life and therefore tries to impose itself upon life from without. Theoretically such a doctrine may sound neither better nor worse than countless other theories—as long as it remains only a theory. In practice, however, it causes a confusion of planes and values.

Art has a plane of its own which may be equivalent to, but not identical with, the plane of actual life. Yet unless it continually feeds on the latter; unless it uses it as its source and its raw material in one, it

becomes anæmic and moribund. This does not mean that the two planes should be mixed. On the contrary—any attempt of the sort leads to substitutes, to hybrids. Art, if dragged from its own plane on to that of actuality, becomes mere “journalism” in all its varieties. The tendency again to force life itself into art, to stylize it according to ready-made formulæ dictated by the æsthetes, is even more futile. For art of life is one thing, and quite a different thing is life itself turned into a “work of art”. Instead of art, one obtains, in this case, only the decorative artifice of a costumier: a series of masks, of affectations and the poses of a dandy.

Such dandyism was a conspicuous feature of the *fin de siècle*. Its sources however go further back: to Byron, to Beau Brummel, and also to the later romanticists such as Gautier, Musset, Mérimée, Baudelaire. Baudelaire in particular is a bridge leading from them right into the mazes of modern “décadence”. Combining his romantic disgust, as well as his rancorous “inferiority complex”, with the visionary and emotional eccentricities of his own American idol, Edgar Allan Poe, he made out of his dandyism both a cult and a refuge. Tormented by tedium, loneliness and by his vulgar surroundings, he defended himself by means of *paradis artificiels* on the one hand, and by the sophistications of a dandy on the other. His aversion to life and reality as such made

him eventually hate everything real: everything obvious, spontaneous and natural.

The sentimental Rousseauism and the artificial, reasoned-out dandyism are thus the two opposite ends of the same romantic consciousness. One and the same thread seems to run (in curious zig-zags) from *Emile* to *Dorian Gray*: via Baudelaire, or such of his followers as Huysmans of the *A Rebours* period.

VII

To those who know des Esseintes—the hero of *A Rebours*, Wilde's *Dorian Gray* will seem rather second-hand. A comparison between the two certainly makes Huysmans sound more convincing than Wilde. With all its pretentious perversions there is something inevitable in Huysmans's morbid book; inevitable at least in so far as it expresses a phase of the author's inner development in a definite direction, provided the word "direction" can be applied at all to a state which is in itself a decadent blind-alley. The character of such a state had been clearly perceived, at the time, by Barbey d'Aurevilly who said that after *A Rebours* there was only one choice for Huysmans: either suicide, or the Holy Cross.

The diagnosis proved right. As though frightened by the alternative, Huysmans embraced the Holy Cross. But it was a long and painful process which

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can be followed, step by step, in his further confessions: *Là-bas*, *En Route* and *L'Oblat*. These books represent the stages of the author's inner ascent: from his cult of vice to the spirituality of the Roman-Catholic Church, which satisfied his sense of beauty, and also sublimated (to some extent) his intense but weary voluptuousness.

In contrast to Huysmans, Oscar Wilde was devoid of introspection. He was equally devoid of inner growth in the sense of a steady and inevitable process. From his first poems in 1881 until his imprisonment in 1895, he remained practically the same amateurish dandy, the same talker, decorative eclectic, and an Epicurean *arbiter elegantiarum*. Partly on account of his "boyish" nature, and partly because life and success had come to him easily, he seemed to be quite satisfied with his fate as long as he could get from it what he wanted. And for the time being his wishes hardly went beyond the pleasures derived from his fame, his wit, and from his chase after new "sensations".

VIII

In spite of that he had secret misgivings. More than once he suspected that there was something wrong with it all; that his æsthetic self-indulgence was but a poor substitute for self-realization. Proofs to this effect are interspersed in some of his earliest works.

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His short poem: "Hélas!" for example, is one of those passing flashes in which he saw himself clearly, at least for a moment.

To drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday
With idle songs for pipe and virelay,
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.
Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ear of God.
Is that time dead? Lo! With a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance—
And must I lose my soul's inheritance?

And here are a few lines from his *Taedium Vitae*:

Far from these slanderous fools who mock my life
Knowing me not, better the lowliest roof
Fit for the meanest hind to sojourn in
Than go back to that hoarse cave of strife
Where my white soul first kissed the mouth of sin.

The truth is that in spite of his flirtation with the æsthetically gilded "beyond good and evil", Oscar Wilde was a latent moralist in whom the moral instinct had been either suppressed or else deprived too early of an adequate will and outlet. However

much he tried to identify conscience with cowardice, to reduce morals to mere manners and to "the last refuge of those people who have no sense of beauty", he could not skip entirely over the secret bond between the "good" and the "beautiful", or shut his eyes on a certain lack of the former within himself. Hence his moralizing passages in such tales as "Star Child", "The Young King", "The Fisherman and his Soul".

The latter is of particular interest, since the fisherman is Oscar Wilde himself. Like him, the fisherman, too, had severed his heart from his soul (i.e. goodness from beauty) and eventually suffered from it. His soul, thus freed, wandered in the world and, in her search for new sensations, coldly committed one crime after the other. "When thou didst send me away into the world", she says to the fisherman, "thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things (crimes) and love them. . . . And so trouble not thyself nor me, but be at peace, for there is no pain that thou shalt not give away, nor any pleasure that thou shalt not receive." The entire story reads like a self-diagnosis on the part of Wilde, and a foreboding of his own ruin.

Less conspicuous but more subtle is "the note of doom that like a purple thread runs through the texture of *Dorian Gray*", as the author words it in *De Profundis*. It was in *Dorian Gray* that Oscar Wilde

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probed (as far as he dared to) into his æsthetic attitude towards life. And he secretly condemned it. He condemned it on moral grounds, and in spite of himself. The book can even be interpreted as an involuntary moral allegory, since Dorian's practice of the "beautiful" devoid of "good" makes him in the end a walking collection of vices, a heartless monstrosity.

The psychological interest of the book is enhanced by the fact that Wilde himself is strangely fascinated by the two "æsthètes", Dorian and Lord Henry, whereas in some deep recesses of his heart he cannot help being repelled by them. Yet the fascination prevailed. Wilde was unable to shake off their promptings. Out of these he constructed his decadent hothouse in which he remained until life itself compelled him to abandon it, and to pass through the appalling experiences, recorded in *De Profundis* and in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

IX

These two creations deservedly stand by themselves both as works of art and as documents of Oscar Wilde's reaction to his own catastrophe. What concerns us here is not the notorious "Wilde Case" itself, but the fact that precisely because Oscar Wilde's tragedy came from without, and not from within, the ordeals he had undergone in gaol tore down—

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much too suddenly—all his æsthetic screens, thus making him face life in some of its rudest and crudest aspects. His shock can be gathered from the two mentioned works into which he put much talent and at least that amount of sincerity of which he was still capable. The fall from the status of a literary and social dandy to that of a common criminal was rendered even more humiliating by the daily routine in the gaol.

We tore the tarry rope to shreds
With blunt and bleeding nails;
We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors
And cleaned the shining rails;
And rank by rank, we soaped the plank,
And clattered with the pails.

The two years, spent under such conditions, opened his eyes on many things, including himself. Artistic life he now conceived as inner self-development in a new sense. And as to art, he began to see in it signatures of deeper realities: "the outward rendered expression of the inward; the soul incarnate; the body instinct with spirit." He even realized that to be truly oneself one must transcend one's ego—through sympathy and compassion. That was why he did not mind the sermonizing note in some stanzas of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (written soon after his release, partly in Berneval and partly in Naples):

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This too I know—and wise it were
If each could know the same—
That every prison that men built
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.

With bars they blur the gracious moon,
And blind the godly sun:
And they do well to hide their Hell,
For in it things are done
That son of God nor son of Man
Ever should look upon.

The gaol was also responsible for the self-accusations we find in *De Profundis*. Like Rousseau in *Confessions*, Oscar Wilde, too, accuses himself and through his very self-indictments endeavours to prove, as it were, that in essence he was a better fellow than he looked. He attacks his own past all the more violently the more he wishes to excuse it, and to be excused.

“The gods have given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a flaneur, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the smaller minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in

the search for new sensations. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes the character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the house-top. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility. . . ."

One could quote pages and pages. And some of them read as if they had been written by a repentant Dorian Gray who, instead of slashing his own portrait, had decided to redeem the vices reflected in it.

X

Although in each public confession there is a certain amount of flirtation, Oscar Wilde had at least a sincere wish to be sincere when composing that very long letter, or would-be letter, most decidedly written with an eye on the publisher. The same note of contrition and good intentions prevails in his private correspondence of that period.

He seemed to be determined to make his downfall a starting point for a fresh development, for a new and fuller life.

Had his self-disgust and his despair been deeper, he might perhaps have contemplated the way Huysmans had gone. Does he not say in *De Profundis* that "once at least in his life each man walks with Christ to Emmaus"? But if ever he thought of such a journey, he did so only as long as the mood lasted. On the actual crossways he changed his mind, and went to Paris instead. . . .

It was enough to meet his former tempters and temptations in order to succumb once more. He threw to the winds all his resolutions and took to "pleasures" as one takes to drugs and opiates. But without an audience before which he could shine, he was now deprived of his chief creative stimulus. Nor was he able to go back to his superficial æstheticism of old. He had seen through it and had left it behind, in gaol. Unable to summon enough stamina for a radical change within himself—in order to create new works from inner inevitability, as the result of a new consciousness and a new man—he was doomed to remain sterile. His premature death, in a Parisian boarding house, came at a time when he had nothing more to say.

AN APOLOGIST OF
DILETTANTISM

AN APOLOGIST OF DILETTANTISM

(ON ANATOLE FRANCE)

I

A GREAT deal of Anatole France's renown was due to the fact that, in spite of his rare culture, he was one of the most accessible and comfortable writers. He combined the curiosity of a universal dilettante with the irony of a highbrow, who yet condescends to everybody's company with an urbanity that is "too well-bred to affect the appearance of it". Having at his disposal a wide range of observations, themes and ideas, he treated all of them with the tact of a brilliant *causeur* who knows where to stop in order to remain gracefully amusing, preserving at the same time the tone of a free "modern" mind. His readers could thus enjoy the illusion of being in contact with what is "up to date" without much, or without any strain on their part. For Anatole France was the last author to disturb them with aspects and problems demanding effort. This does not mean that he avoided such problems. On the contrary, his books are full of them. But their disturbing quality is tempered and dissolved by his wit, his cheerful irony, and by that truly French intelligence for which alone he deserved

to be proclaimed (by Jules Lemaître) "*l'extrême fleur du génie latin*".

An attempt to define this *génie latin* is a hopeless undertaking. In a German, for example, one may find more thoroughness, more "solidity" than in a Frenchman. With all that one cannot help feeling that with Germans the intellect as such prevails over the intelligence, while with the French the reverse is the case. If a Frenchman understands more than he knows or cares to know, a German only too often knows more than he is able to understand. The French genius tends to simplify the most complicated things—even at the risk of being lucid at the expense of profundity. The genius of the Germans, on the other hand, is attracted by what is "profound" and involved. Hence its propensity to complicate even simple problems, to approach life itself through solemn theories of life, or else to be estranged from it by too much learning. This cult of quantitative knowledge (which found one of its expressions in an exaggerated esteem for learned titles and diplomas), coupled with an indomitable "will to culture", made the pre-war Germans the most erudite, the most encyclopædic nation in the world. So it was natural that many of them should identify culture itself with learning—forgetting that the former is, above all, a matter of quality and not of quantity; a matter of "blood" rather than of mere

brains; of various sub-conscious elements and tendencies stored up in the entire racial collective.

A Frenchman may take cultural matters less seriously than a German. Yet the very fact that individually he belongs to a more settled racial culture on which he can draw even without being aware of it, makes his intelligent "superficiality" more stimulating, more suggestive, and more acute than the heavy intellectual earnestness of the Germans. The elegant vivacious *causeur* is as typical of the first as the professorial *raisonneur* is of the second. But the German culture, with all its possibilities, is still too much in a state of quest and fermentation. That of the French, on the other hand, seems to have already worked out too definite a shape and style. Herein lies its advantage, as well as its danger: the danger of an exaggerated "academic" traditionalism. For the more perfect the heritage of the past, the more one is inclined to submit to its charm and authority. Instead of seeking one prefers to conform, to define, to admire, to play and display—until form begins to matter more than substance, and the spirit of life itself becomes ousted by the pitiless and yet elegant *esprit*. One may still be aware of various "ultimate problems"; but instead of uselessly worrying over them, one prefers to skip past them with that polished scepticism which reached its climax in the mind and art of Anatole France.

II

The astounding variety of Anatole France's work is more or less unified by two factors. One is his style; the other, his approach to life. With regard to the former one can repeat what he himself says of Maupassant's style (in *La Vie Littéraire*, I); namely, that he possesses "three great virtues of a French author: first of all, clarity, then clarity once more, and finally, clarity". In whatever he wrote he remained a Parnassian to the end—disciplined, artfully simple, and sufficiently detached to allow himself the luxury of perfect ease amidst even the most contradictory ideas and aspects of life. What is known as France's scepticism is in essence only a different name for that detachment of his which he regarded as an inevitable condition for intellectual freedom.

Being the reverse of a doctrinaire by his very nature, he accepted the relativity of things and ideas simply because this was—in his opinion—the only honest attitude on the part of a free mind. It is enough to read his *Le Jardin d'Epicure* in order to realize his aversion not only to the tyranny of errors, but also to the tyranny of imposed or self-imposed "truths". The cocksure apostles of such truths always struck him either as devoid of inner honesty, or else as minds of an inferior order: narrow, self-deceived, and stupidly conceited. Such characters as the moral fanatic Paphnutius (*Thais*), or the equally narrow

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revolutionary fanatic Evariste Gameline (*Les Dieux ont Soif*), attracted his artistic imagination precisely by being his own opposites. For he himself considered dogmatic convictions as dangerous to one's inner liberty as ignorance. It was for this reason that he remained a sceptic and preferred opinions to convictions, particularly to bigoted convictions. So he was able to contemplate even the greatest contrasts of thought and life with a benevolent tolerance. Nothing defines Anatole France better than these words of one of his characters (Gallio, in *Sur la Pierre Blanche*): "Were I not conciliatory with regard to my own ideas, were I to confer upon a single system an exclusive preference, I could no longer tolerate the freedom of every opinion; having destroyed my own freedom of thought, I could not readily tolerate it in the case of others, and I should forfeit the respect due to every doctrine established and professed by a sincere man. The gods forbid that I should wish my opinion to prevail to the exclusion of any other, and exercise an absolute sway on other minds."

An artist with such an attitude has little in common with self-tormented seekers, or with the impetuous fighters for ideals. He is more likely to become an eclectic by his taste, and a hedonist by his motives. In Anatole France (a pupil of Voltaire, Montaigne and Renan) these two features were not only inter-

dependent—they were a logical outcome of his very scepticism. For he was a sceptic not from indifference, but from a sense of fairness, as well as from an urge to accept in order to enjoy. Instead of dwelling on insoluble problems, he took humanity and life for what they were worth, and tried to make the best of them, that is, to extract from everything the widest range of pleasures: pleasure gratifying his intellect, his æsthetic instinct, and his senses. His curiosity, his broadness of interest, thus only increased and intensified the area of his own Epicurean delight.

Taking his stand not so much above as outside truth and error, he became a candid sophist and glided upon even the most dangerous themes, doctrines and ideas with the ease of a perfect skater—always carefully avoiding the holes in the ice. And as if afraid of pessimism which lurks behind a sceptical attitude towards life, he found a weapon against it in his own ironic wit. Gay irony, understanding, reserved kindness and a hidden contempt were so intermixed in his nature that it would be impossible to separate one from the other. What can be more delightfully ironical than the paradoxes he voiced through his own mouthpieces—the amiable sophists, Nicias, Abbé Coignard, Bergeret? And even when his contempt for man took the upper hand, his taste still prevented him from exchanging his Attic salt for the pepper of the more aggressive (and for this

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very reason less stinging) Bernard Shaw. His laughter remained human, because while laughing at humanity he was always ready to laugh at himself.

III

As an eclectic, Anatole France indulged alternately in all the inclinations of his manifold personality. Being too much of a passive "æsthete" to take anything very seriously, he remained an amused spectator who let things, fancies, impressions and ideas come to him in profusion. And he took them in profusion. Hence the variety of his works—from the good-humoured *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* to the Swiftean *L'Ile des Pingouins*; from the bitingly subtle *Thais* to the serene mockery of *La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pedauque*; from the auto-biographic *Pierre Nozière* to his novels under the general title, *L'Histoire Contemporaine*. He was always attracted by the themes which demanded a fine psychological and dialectic tact, combined with a caustic and yet cautious display of intelligence—such as one finds to a supreme degree in his masterpiece, *La Révolte des Anges*.

A frank voluptuary of mind and senses, he was in love with the gay, voluptuous and cleverly shallow eighteenth century. Even his interest in Christianity was perhaps due less to the æsthetic than to the "voluptuous" side of that religion. It is one of his frequent sayings that "la religion offre aux âmes

voluptueuses une volupté de plus: la volupté de se perdre". Unable to indulge in this *volupté* himself, he was always drawn towards it, even fascinated by it. According to one of his intimates (Paul Gsell), Anatole France's tastes were, in spite of his atheism, more ecclesiastical than those of any other mortal. He was, moreover, an eager collector of religious objects.

The eclectic trend of Anatole France emerged first of all in his strongest and perhaps his only passion, the passion for collecting, in which his æsthetic sense was often less discriminating than one would expect. Jean Jacques Brousson, France's one-time secretary and the author of the gossipy *Anatole France en Pantoufles*, gives the following amusing description of his master's writing desk in the house of Mme de Caillavet with whom he lived after his marriage had proved a failure. "On the table, which is in the same Gothic style that hails from the Faubourg St. Antoine or the chapel of Dreux, is a medley of objects. Here is a reproduction by some electric process of the silver goblet found at Bosco Reale with a ring of dancing cupids and skeletons. There are seals, match boxes, boxes of pens, and throat lozenges; there again, a Breton doll, a ghastly crystal inkpot, the sort of pen wiper you might win in a raffle, embroidered with beads and flowers, and here a crystal paper-knife and a crystal paper weight, all complete,

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a schoolboy's leather pen box with the Eiffel Tower and a captive balloon painted on it, medals, and two or three pairs of scissors and a huge pot of gum, and an astonishing metal penholder with the monogram A. F. on it surrounded by a sprig of ivy, just like the presents people give to children being confirmed. Behind his head is a set of pine bookshelves. On one, within reach of his hand, are Littré, Godfroy, Darmsteter and the *Grande Encyclopédie*. Above is a complete set of Renan . . .”

The very fact that Anatole France found it necessary to be surrounded by so many objects may be taken as a proof that in essence he was of a shy, retiring disposition—a man who preferred, on the whole, the motley variety of his study to a personal contact with the motley actualities of life. What is more, he preserved for a long time the same attitude also with regard to literature. For here, too, he was a collector, a literary antiquary and connoisseur. It would be difficult to find a writer of his calibre who made such frequent use of other people's works, of literary and historical antiques. Instead of inventing, he often only paraphrased, altered and “stylized” the material suggested to him by old literatures, by folklore, by legends, *contes* and memoirs. But while taking his goods where he found them, he still turned them into perfect narratives of his own—narratives which one can fully enjoy in books such as *Le Puits de Ste.*

Claire, or *Les Contes de Jacques Tournebroche*. Nor was he incapable of the scholar's painstaking research. On the *La Vie de Jeanne d'Arc* he worked for about twenty years. And the result was well worth while.

Owing to his literary, historical, philosophic and antiquarian interests, Anatole France was at his best in those two literary genres which appeal, by their very nature, to eclectics: the *causerie* and the *pastiche*. The four volumes of his *La Vie Littéraire*, for instance, may be devoid of depth, at times even of a reliable approach; yet they are exquisite *causeries*. Such books again as *Les Opinions de Jérôme Coignard*, or *Sur la Pierre Blanche*, are brilliant examples of that *pastiche* which substitutes a clever mechanical arrangement for an organic structure without forfeiting thereby any charm. They also prove that, whenever his creative power began to falter, France knew how to refresh it by the purely intellectual or even "bookish" stimuli of an antiquary and a belated humanist in one. Now and then however he overdid this tendency at the risk of spoiling his themes, or of himself speaking instead of his own characters. There is a strong "bookish" touch even in his conversations. However witty these may be, they strike one in the end as being too much alike, without marked individual differences; and too many of his characters talk as if they were rehearsing cleverly written parts.

IV

But all said and done, Anatole France is primarily a *conteur* who distils his experiences, impressions and ideas in such a way as to produce the desired effect by a minimum of means. His simplicity is that of a complex modern mind which has mastered, or at least organized all the material within his range. The simple "naive" exterior appeals to him also as a veil for an ironic string, or a *pointe*, which is far from being naive. The end of his *Le Procureur de Judée*, for instance, is the more powerful because of the trivial chat that leads up to it.

The measure of his art is also the dexterity with which he conceals his deliberate craft. However chiselled his sentences may be, he knows how to convey through them, not only the impression of naturalness, but also of freshness; at times even the ingenuousness of a child. Books in which he describes his own childhood and youth preserve the flavour of spontaneity, although they must have been written with as conscious an artistic discipline as the rest of his work. In dealing with children Anatole France can become childlike without being childish—a quality which alone requires much wisdom. His *Dialogue upon Fairy Tales* shows a fine grasp of a child's mind, while his fantasy, *L'Abeille*, is, despite its coldness, a valuable contribution to children's classics.

As a psychologist he is subtle rather than profound. An amusing situation interests him more than various "depths" of the human soul. It is psychological *finesse* that attracts him above all. We can see this particularly in his descriptions of love, or better—of voluptuousness, since he never separates the two. Still, being a *conteur*, he does not mind sacrificing psychology to a good yarn, or to a vivid two-dimensional treatment of types and characters. He is not less fond of rendering the latter in terms of mere conversational discussion—a method by which he often figures as a competent "bookman" anxious to explain, to inform, and even to instruct. It was first through this channel that a new and almost unexpected feature gradually began to assert itself in Anatole France: his didactic vein.

This vein looms forward, in some of his later works, to such an extent as to encroach upon his art. His otherwise delightful mouthpiece, Bergeret (in the series, *L'Histoire Contemporaine*), becomes at times positively annoying: not so much by his ideas as by his invariable didactic comments apropos of every trifle. Even when talking to his dog (in *M. Bergeret à Paris*), he unburdens himself of a long tirade about the weaknesses of humanity and concludes—quite seriously—with commonplaces such as these: "You do not know (the tirade is still addressed to the dog) that true strength lies in wisdom

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and that through wisdom alone nations rise to greatness. You do not know that that which makes the glory of the nations is not the senseless clamour raised in public places, but the noble thought. You do not know that those who have suffered imprisonment, outrage and exile, for justice's sake, have honoured their country in the act. You do not know."

However unlike Anatole France such hollow passages may sound, they are less surprising if regarded as symptoms of a period in which he tried to go beyond mere "dilettantism", to embrace a cause, even to fight for it. But in that attempt he showed both his good will and his limitations.

V

The chief limitation of Anatole France lay in his scepticism, which became for him an Epicurean "cushion of doubt" in its literal sense. He questioned life only in so far as this was compatible with his inner comfort. Whenever he stumbled upon some really disturbing aspect and idea, he hastily turned it into a witty paradox, or else ignored it as one ignores the presence of importunate acquaintances. Always prone to mistake voluptuousness for sensitiveness, and a purely quantitative variety of impressions, sensations and ideas for the fullness of existence, he ran the danger of turning life itself into a great *pastiche*. Having adopted scepticism as a safety-

valve against the dogmatic fixity of life and thought, he made of such an attitude a dogma which threatened to sap his active will. After all, complete personality can perhaps be developed through a victory of will not only over one's anarchic instincts, but also over one's scepticism—in the name of creative values. Radical scepticism is bound to deny, or at least to avoid, all value and consequently all direction. It may make one "free", yet there is no greater burden than freedom for its own sake.

"Art thou free?" matters much less than "*What* is it thou art free for?" Which brings us to the problem of choice, of purpose, and value.

Anatole France realized the danger of his own freedom only after having indulged in it to the full. It was from the middle of the 'nineties that he began to show an increasing effort to "choose", to work himself into a genuine belief in humanity, and even into a spokesman of better times to come. When he saw all the forces of organized idiocy and corruption cynically driving the whole of the contemporary world to its ruin, he abandoned his whimsical æsthetic detachment to help the cause of sanity and justice. The courageous part he played in the Dreyfus affair is well-known. With equal zest he raised his voice against human stupidity on several other occasions. As if anxious to find an active focus, he successively approached socialism, patriotism, and

dabbled at last also in bolshevism. From time to time he even became aggressive. Yet the very excess of his intelligence must have been a great obstacle. The fact that he wavered between so many "isms" is a proof that he did not succeed in imposing a *credo* upon himself, however much he may have desired it. His voice sounded more convincing when he had no convictions than when he vainly tried to have them.

It was Jérôme Coignard (one of Anatole France's most engaging characters) who proclaimed the sterility of truths detected by intelligence alone, and added: "To help mankind one must throw aside all reason as an encumbrance, and rise on the wings of enthusiasm." But such enthusiasm was lacking in Anatole France. He was the product of too "intelligent" a culture, and the child of too experienced an epoch, to be able to embrace it whole-heartedly. Knowing neither the verve of true affirmation, nor the despair of complete negation, he remained to the end only a sceptical dilettante of life. Instead of a great creator, he is a great *littérateur* whose art, with all its charm and intellectual vivacity, is somewhat cold and static. No wonder that the younger generation, who had to face life in its less "Epicurean" aspects, turned away from him!

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

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I

A MALICIOUS anecdote would have it that during the rehearsals of d'Annunzio's *Pisanella*, at the Châtelet, a French reporter interviewed the author and, while chatting with him, expressed his admiration of a fine cameo he saw on d'Annunzio's finger.

"You like this cameo? It's yours."

And the poet slipped the ring on to the visitor's finger. After the interview the journalist hurried to a jeweller's shop in order to find out the value of so generous a gift. The man looked at the cameo and smiled:

"Its value? It's just a bit of glass—worth about twopence."

It would be unfair to make this anecdote symbolic of d'Annunzio's work as a whole. On the other hand, many a glittering jewel of his art would prove, on close inspection, only an ingeniously worked up "bit of glass". At the first glance, however, d'Annunzio is almost sure to dazzle by his brilliance, his eloquence and coquettish pose. So much so that one gets fatigued by the very monotony of the abundance. How often one wishes to see him in a poorer garb, in a more modest condition! But he goes on

with his lavish display, without giving one even time to halt, to draw breath, or to examine the quality of the goods offered. More spasmodic than spontaneous, he is too much of an "impressionist" to be durably impressive. He also mixes art with elements which have little in common with æsthetic emotions as such. Substituting brilliance for beauty, and sensuality for sensibility, he is not for the long run. Sooner or later he is "found out". Discriminating readers usually leave much of his works behind as a kind of literary wild oats of their youth.

Even those who continue to admire his talent, do so with certain reservations. They are disturbed by his frequent lapses of taste, as well as by the derivative character of a number of his writings. For he has made a practice of following all literary fashions, cleverly blending their *dernier cri* with his own inherited or acquired culture. Horace and Carducci, Dante and Stecchetti, Zola and Maupassant, Nietzsche and Baudelaire, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Maeterlinck—all of them left some mark or other on his work. And he assimilated them with such versatility as to make one wonder whether he was not a great poetic virtuoso rather than a great poet. As in Swinburne (whom he resembles), so in d'Annunzio the virtuoso often thrives at the expense of the poet. And whenever he scents sterility or exhaustion, he invariably switches over to other influences, assum-

ing a new role just in time to spur his flagging Pegasus.

With this he combines the egotism and the impetuosity of a boy, an energy which is as alert as his mind, an insatiable appetite for carnal experiences, and an equally insatiable impulse to show off in order to admire himself and to be admired—a thing which is not always done in the best of manners. Beneath the affected literary aristocrat one often senses an over-dressed and over-pomaded beau of letters who must always be in the public eye; if not through a real success, then at least through a *succès de scandale*. Notoriety as the high road to fame is d'Annunzio's great secret. It explains the rapid growth of his early reputation, and even throws some light on his literary development.

II

D'Annunzio the poet and the writer developed as quickly and many-sidedly as the age to which he owed his success. He was only sixteen when he published his first poems, *Primo Vere* (Spring), inspired by Carducci's *Barbaric Odes*. Less than three years after that immature attempt he emerged in his *Canto Novo* (New Song, 1882) as an accomplished craftsman, brimming over with the frank sensuality of a young faun. But as if demoralized by his success with the public and with women, he soon showed

an exaggerated bent towards elegant perversities which were rapidly coming into fashion. "Here we have a sure success", he wrote to his publisher Sommaruga in 1884, "in my *Book of Virgins*, alongside of many clean pages, there are others of great boldness. The plot evolves between Church and brothel—there is a fragrance of sacred incense and an odour of dank iniquity. . . ." In the same year he published his sensational *Intermezzo di Rime*—a collection coloured by the erotomania for which he subsequently paid with an inner fatigue, reflected in *Elegie Romane* (1892), in *Poema Paradisiaco*, and even more in his two autobiographic novels, *Il Piacere* (Enjoyment, 1889) and *Trionfo della Morte* (The Triumph of Death, 1894).

If there be such a thing as a compendium of decadence of the 'nineties, we find it in these two novels. Sperelli, the hero of *Il Piacere*, and Aurispa—his counterpart in *Trionfo della Morte*, are one and the same character, that is, d'Annunzio himself, after he had plunged into all the sensuous enjoyments that Rome could offer him. That is why both books are nearer to erotic self-exhibitionism on the part of a man who "kisses and tells"—nay, who kisses in order to tell—than to mere self-analysis. True enough, d'Annunzio analyses even his most febrile experiences, yet the very minuteness with which he does so, seems to exclude real passion. We find in him, instead,

only lust which he whips and spurs on with all the "stronger" stimulants the more he is afraid of exhaustion. And when the exhaustion came, in spite of all, it was full of that "sadness of flesh when the flame of desire is extinguished in the ice of disgust, and when no veil of love envelops the inert nudity."

Being only a sadness of tired "flesh", the note of contrition which we find in his *Poema Paradisiaco*, for instance, has nothing to do with a sincere spiritual tedium. It was a fleeting aftermath which he soon tried to stifle in the same doubtful *piacere* until he became its victim, or almost so. Caught in its meshes, he saw its climax and at the same time an escape from it, only in the "triumph of death". And so d'Annunzio's *Aurispia* commits a voluptuous murder and suicide, garnished with all the emotional spices, and enveloped in an atmosphere which drips with Wagnerian narcotics.

That d'Annunzio himself was aware of the danger is proved by his repeated groping for some outlet or other. One of them he anticipated in his *Odi Navali* (1893), with its rhetorical "will to power" and its call for patriotic action. Another one which he tried was Tolstoyan pity and humanitarianism. His two simultaneous novels, *Giovanni Episcopo* and *L'Innocente* (1892), are both marked by Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's influence, which was however as tempor-

ary as it was superficial. Servio Tullio, in particular (the hero of the second novel), is, in spite of his "Tolstoyan" moods, d'Annunzio's staple character: the super-erotic decadent, who shrinks from no tricks when the gratification of his lust and egotism is concerned. But in the meantime d'Annunzio was undergoing a new and entirely different stimulus: the philosophy of Nietzsche.

III

Nietzsche, properly remade and "adapted", now became the central and decisive influence in d'Annunzio's career. "Superman! Will to power! Beyond good and evil"—such sonorous slogans, which can cover so many things Nietzsche never thought of, had the effect of a tonic on the fatigued d'Annunzio. Of the four qualities—*volontà*, *voluttà*, *istinto* and *orgoglio* (will, lust, instinct, pride) which he himself proclaims as the main constituents of his nature, he had been indulging so far in the last three. Under such a stimulus as Nietzsche, however, his will, too, became awakened and galvanized into that theatrical "will to power" which gradually drove him on to the political stage of Italy, and even of Europe.

His first "Nietzschean" novel, *Le Vergini delle Rocce* (The Virgins of the Rocks), is written in a more disciplined and manly style, although his conception of a superman, as portrayed in Claudio Cantelmo,

is cerebral and childishly pretentious. On the other hand, the "will to power" aroused in d'Annunzio, was bound to come to terms, sooner or later, with his incurable "will to pleasure", for the sake of which he had already obliterated (long before his acquaintance with Nietzsche) all distinction between good and evil. His well-known play, *La Gioconda* (1899), and the novel *Il Fuoco* (Fire, 1900) typify such an accommodation. The main character of the play is an æsthetic "superman", in whom the creative ecstasy and sensuality merge in one single disposition to which he coldly sacrifices the most devoted human being—his wife. And as for Stelio Effrena, the hero of *Il Fuoco*, he is a self-infatuated cross of Claudio Cantelmo with Sperelli. In spite of its fine, though overladen, descriptive passages, the novel is a "gorgeous" blend of decadence and verbal rococo.

It was only in his four volumes of *Laudi* (Praises, 1903, 1904), that d'Annunzio really blended as it were, his *volontà* and his *voluttà*, joining the verve of his previous *Odi Navali* with the paganism of *Canto novo*. The whole of it is an ambitious poetic autobiography, or a subjective epic, in which d'Annunzio figures as a modern Ulysses nurtured on the heroic philosophy of Nietzsche. He assumes the role of a self-appointed leader calling to new adventures and to a joy of life, embracing all the diversity of existence: *tutte le pasture, tutte le cose*

pure e impure (all its pastures, all its pure and impure things).

There is no doubt that *Laudi*, however uneven its volumes may be, is the climax of d'Annunzio's craft and inspiration. Yet even here he is often derivative and devoid of depth. His broadness is that of surface, and his intoxication with force and life is suggestive of a drug rather than of a divine draught. More paganizing than pagan, he repeats too loudly the old, already a thousand times repeated theme:

O Galileo,
men vali tu che nel dantesco fuoco
il pilota re d'Itaca Odisseo.
Troppo il tuo verbo al paragone è fioco
e debile il tuo gesto.¹

Even more one-sided is d'Annunzio's political gospel. In his temperamental adoption of the aspirations of Young Italy, he now became a poet of patriotism, of energy and action. Yet instead of expanding through his nation and through the cause of his nation, he reduced that cause to a very narrow *sacro egoismo*. As a bard of imperialism, of blood and vengeance, he found his ideal in a blend of Bismarck, Cesare Borgia, and an operatic *condottiere*.

¹ O Galilean, thou art worth less than Ulysses, the seafaring King of Ithaca, who is in the Dantean hell. Thy parabolic word is too tame, and too weak is thy gesture.

IV

During his period of aggressive will d'Annunzio's old sensuality, too, assumed a more aggressive aspect. Braced by Nietzsche's gospel of manliness and hardness, he would no longer contemplate an outlet such as Tullio's in *Trionfo della Morte*. Tarsis, the hero of his *Forse che sì, Forse che no* (Perhaps yes, Perhaps no, 1910), tries to escape from his erotic slavery through the manly sport of aviation. In *La Nave* (The Ship, 1908), again, d'Annunzio combines extreme lust with extreme political "will to power", both equally loud and cruel.

The note of cruelty, so pronounced already in his *Novelle della Pescara* (Stories of Pescara, 1902), amounts at times to undisguised sadism—a feature which has been variously commented upon by most of d'Annunzio's critics. Its germs can be detected in some of his early poems: in *Intermezzo*, for instance. But the images which once had been only occasional sadistic "day-dreams" became eventually a cult with him, an erotic stimulant, and even a source of inspiration.

D'Annunzio began to wound in order to gloat over the wounds, to be exhilarated by blood as the decadent Romans used to be exhilarated by the horrors of the Circus Maximus. Blood and lust became at last the favourite twins of his Muse. His best known play, *Francesca da Rimini* (1902), he calls

a “*dramma di sangue e di lussuria*” (a drama of blood and lust). His *La Nave* has the sub-title, “*poema di sangue e di gloria*”; and its main heroine, Basilida, could have originated—like Pantea of his earlier *Tramonto* (Sunset)—only in an imagination tormented by erotic sadism. The element of violence is almost too oppressive, even in his otherwise wonderful play, *La Figlia di Iorio* (The Daughter of Iorio), while the end of the second and the whole of the third act of *La Gioconda* can cause one actual physical pain. It goes without saying that there is too much “blood” also in d’Annunzio’s patriotic harangues.¹

Aspects such as these he can combine, quite conveniently, not only with Nietzsche’s gospel, but even with that of Christ when required. *La Figlia di Iorio* (1904) exhales a Catholic-mystical atmosphere, while *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien* (1910, written in French) is a truly decadent mixture of Christian exaltation and sexual perversity. The fact that d’Annunzio was capable of writing such things during his Nietzschean and pagan period is only another proof of the assimilative and eclectic power which one can trace in his work.

¹ It would be interesting to investigate the connection between an eroto-sadistic self-projection and militant nationalism, but this is outside the scope of the present study.

Yet in contrast with such an eclectic as Anatole France who always preserves a uniform level of intelligence and taste, d'Annunzio shows a curious unevenness. At his best he may approach and even achieve perfection (in spite of his lack of wit, of humour, and of human sympathy); at his worst, however, he is hollow and tedious. Both extremes can be found in his plays.

D'Annunzio is too much of a lyrical poet and rhetorician to be a true dramatist. He presents his characters, not in their psychological evolution, but at the moment of their "climax", of their explosion, which he usually depicts with all the melodramatic vein at his disposal. On the other hand, he is too much preoccupied with his own self to be able to create living characters. Like Byron, he knows in essence one hero only: himself. And once he cannot exhibit, glorify and gratify d'Annunzio, his inspiration either falters, or else he works on borrowed material—a process in which the more words, rhythms and colour effects he uses the less he has to say. His very abundance is thus one of his main limitations, although he overcomes it at his best. In one of his plays—*La Figlia di Iorio*—he has done so with great success. Written in a restrained archaic language, it breathes the atmosphere of his native Abruzzi, as well as the mysticism of a crude peasant community.

Francesca da Rimini, too, though more exuberant and less compact, has true poetic passages. His derivative *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien* is a further proof of his versatility. So are the first two acts of his *Fedra* (1909). But on the whole, d'Annunzio is too fond of gorgeous *mise-en-scène*; of transposing musical and pictorial elements into verbal effusions; of operatic devices, such as we find in his two *Sogni* (Dreams), in *Gloria*, or in *La Nave*, the proper scenery for which could only be supplied by the flamboyant "Venetian School" at the period of its decay.

Always inclined to declaim and to relate rather than to show through action, d'Annunzio gives us an effectful static drama (in the manner of Maeterlinck or Chekhov) in *La Città Morta* (The Dead City). Yet a comparison of the latter with the best of Chekhov and Maeterlinck is likely to suggest, once again, the difference between a jewel and its glittering imitation. Even when d'Annunzio actually creates intense scenes, he is more theatrical than dramatic. He also engineers everything, including Fate, too much from without. Most of his plays are ingenious mechanisms rather than organisms. And they are in danger of being either very pretentious or very shallow as, for instance, his *Piu che l'Amore* (More than Love), with its "Nietzschean" exaltation of crime. Other favourite tricks of his are simply calculated to arouse the libidinous fancies of the spectators, or

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to shock their nerves in the manner of *La Gioconda*. Such tricks may be effective for a time. But once we have recovered from the shock we are likely to resent it, as though cheated out of an æsthetic emotion by its substitute—"worth about twopence". D'Annunzio mixes cheap substitutes even with his genuine poetic inspiration. And he has been doing this so long and so cleverly that they have become almost his second nature.

VI

But what is d'Annunzio's actual place in European literature? The answer seems somewhat perplexing. D'Annunzio has a great international reputation and practically no international significance. His literary fame has been maintained by self-advertisement, and also by exploits which have nothing to do with literature proper. As a poet pure and simple, d'Annunzio has been, with all his talent, too many things at once to be able to crystallize into a creative genius of universal importance. Instead of being great he is only grand.

On the other hand, his later *italianità* gradually drove him away from all that can be called the European spirit proper. Unable to combine the two, he became a good Italian at the expense of the "good European" (in Goethe's sense). And so, although his best poetry is sure to remain among the gems of

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Italian literature, he lacks certain qualities which are essential to the greatest art. He also paid too much homage to literary fashions of the day—with the result that as a writer he has even now been left behind, together with those fashions. Not a few of his books are utterly dated. And as to his trappings, they are beginning to look faded and moth-eaten. Much of his gold has proved, in the end, only gilt. The world of d'Annunzio already seems aeons away from our post-war sensibility, and there is no return to it. Even those oversexed readers, who once used to revel in d'Annunzio's work for their own special reasons, now seem to have abandoned him for new and more "advanced" idols in this respect.

A different matter is d'Annunzio's position in Italy. There he is not only the smartest, the most "brilliant" poet of his generation, but also the most conspicuous figure in the entire recent culture of Italy. It was d'Annunzio who drew—through his very eclecticism—all the chief modern currents into the somewhat conservative Italian literature. One could trace to his influence also various movements which are outside literature, for instance, the *fascismo*.

During and after the War he even became a national institution—an honour which is not easy to bear in any country. Yet d'Annunzio seems to have submitted to it with the same exuberant emphasis of

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his own personal qualities which he had shown on so many other occasions. Not so long ago, he presented Italy with his private house (or shrine, one might say) on Lake Garda. The gift is recorded, for the benefit of future generations, in a document which may well be quoted as a suitable conclusion of this survey. Perhaps even as an example of d'Annunzio's manner and—manners.

"I venture to offer to the Italian people", he concludes, "all that remains to me and all that from this date I may acquire. I, who once sang idly of ancient palaces and sumptuous villas, I have come to end my life in silence in this peasant's house, not so much to humble myself, as to test my own powers of creation and transfiguration. My love of Italy, my worship of memories, my aspirations towards heroism, my presentiment of my country's future—they are all revealed here in every line, in every note of colour. Here, too, are my books, not kept to gather dust, but as living entities, and perhaps no solitary student has ever had so many. . . I have founded an open-air theatre, I have organized schools and workshops to renew the Italian traditions of the minor arts. I beat on iron, I blow glass, I engrave stones, I print with wood blocks, I colour stuffs, I carve bone and boxwood, I interpret the recipes of Caterina Sforza, and distil perfumery. And I beg the Head of the Government of Italy to accept my offering whole

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and entire, and to declare it to be irrevocable and inalienable in any way or at any time; witness the living who are watchful and the dead who see."

Let us hope that at least some of "the living who are watchful" have more sense of humour than Gabriele d'Annunzio.

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Vous qui prétendez que des bêtes poussent des sanglots de chagrin, que des malades désespèrent, que des morts rêvent mal, tâchez de raconter ma chute et mon sommeil.

Rimbaud.

I

IN dealing with Arthur Rimbaud one has the advantage of being amply supplied with biographical data. Much has been written in recent years about his thwarted childhood in Charleville, his brilliance at school, his early disgust with the *bourgeois* atmosphere of his native town, and his repeated flights to Paris—flights which proved disappointing even after Paul Verlaine had taken (with such disastrous results) the clumsy young vagabond under his wing. The unpalatable character of his relations with Verlaine has already been explored—by M. Coulon and others—almost to nausea. So have the roamings and wrangles of the two eccentric Bohemians, as well as their last quarrel in Brussels, where the drunken *pauvre Lélian* shot his “demoniacal” friend and had to expiate his deed in prison. Fairly well known is also Rimbaud’s Odyssey after he had given up both

Verlaine and literature. Numerous biographers have tracked him, like so many detectives, from one country to another, from one profession to another, including that of a circus interpreter. A tramp in Europe, a deserter from the Dutch Foreign Legion in Java, an overseer in Cyprus, a trader in Africa, a provider of out-of-date rifles to his shrewd majesty the "king of kings" of Abyssinia—such was his subsequent career, until it came to a sad end in Marseilles, where he died (1891) at the age of thirty-seven.

However adventurous such a life may look, the inner adventures of Rimbaud the poet were, as long as they lasted, no less surprising. And what strikes one at once is Rimbaud's mental and emotional precocity, as well as his technical perfection, at an age when even the greatest talents only grope and imitate. It was between fifteen and eighteen that he wrote some of the finest poems modern French literature can boast of; after which he deserted all literary activities so irrevocably that in his later life he used to blush with anger at the mere reminder of those days.

The dilemma one is confronted with is thus a double one. First, how was it possible for a raw provincial youth to take such a short cut in his inner life as to experience in some three years more, much more, than others do in a lifetime? And secondly,

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might not this very precocity have been his greatest danger—in so far as it made him face unusual inner conflicts before he was prepared for them? In a word, did Rimbaud smash his own genius from a mere caprice, or was there something more behind it? And if so, what? A bird's eye view of his work and character may perhaps suggest at least a few guesses.

II

A salient feature of Rimbaud's youth is his blend of extreme and at times truly savage vitality with a complete absence of any will or power to adapt himself to external conditions. Unable to bend these to himself, he was driven much too early into his own subjective inner world to which he abandoned himself without restraint. It was here that he discovered his poetic gift, as well as that unlimited freedom through which alone he could assert his inner independence against all restrictions, all conventional forms. Having embraced this attitude to life, he naturally applied it, with the same ruthlessness, to art and poetry.

To be a poet already meant to Rimbaud then to explore one's inner nature without shrinking even from its strangest, its most unnatural aspects—a tendency which brought him close to another introspective visionary: Charles Baudelaire. Rimbaud's

own confession to this effect can be found in his long letter to Paul Demeny (May, 1871) where he insists that "the first study of a man who wants to be a poet is a study of himself, complete self-knowledge. He searches his own soul, scrutinizes it, tempts it, learns it. As soon as he has grasped its essence, he must cultivate it . . . I say that one should be a visionary, that one should become a visionary. The poet becomes a visionary by a steady, violent and deliberate derangement (*dérèglement*) of all the senses. All kinds of love, of pain, of madness are his; he seeks within himself and exhausts all poisons in order to keep only their quintessence. His is the ineffable torment in which he needs all his faith, his supra-human force; through which he becomes above all a great diseased, a great criminal, a great outcast (*le grand maudit*)—and a supreme savant. For he has reached the Unknown. . . . But since examining the unseen and listening to the unheard is quite a different matter from bringing back the spirit of dead things, Baudelaire is the greatest of visionaries, the king of poets, a veritable god. All the same, he lived in a milieu which was too artistic, and that much praised form of his is tawdry. The discoveries of the Unknown also demand new forms."

Such was the slippery ground on which the "decadence" of Rimbaud and that of Baudelaire met. The deeper motives of the two poets were, however,

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poles apart. Baudelaire was a weakling, a physical degenerate, who drugged himself with illusions of strength, of "Satanic" daring. Blasphemy—that mask of power on the face of a weakling—was Baudelaire's spiritual temptation, to which he succumbed again and again. Rimbaud, however, was reckless from a super-abundance of vitality—a vitality which soon became his greatest danger: owing partly to his "deliberate derangement of the senses", and partly to an utter lack of direction.

An adventurous vagabond in life, he was thus a haphazard adventurer also in the realm of the Spirit. Many an incursion of his into that realm resembled a piratic raid, in which he spared neither himself nor his prey. Eventually it became a habit with him to plunge into the Unknown, not only without a compass, but also by means of "derangements" procured by opium and hasheesh.

Further short cuts into the Unknown were provided by those self-lacerations which he cultivated simply because he considered them inherent in the fate of a *poète maudit*. Here pain became both a source of new "discoveries" and a kind of snobbery: a proof of his being superior to others, one of the elect. The more pain he inflicted upon himself the more he revelled in his exclusiveness of suffering, in his own spiritual conceit. That such pain and conceit can lead even to ecstasy is proved by many a

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passage in his works. Here are a few lines from his preface to *A Season in Hell* (translated by G. F. Lees. The Fortune Press):

"I am succeeding in banishing all human hope from my mind. In order to strangle all joys I have sprung upon them stealthily like a wild beast.

"I have summoned the executioners, whilst perishing, to gnaw the butt-ends of their guns. I have summoned scourges so as to stifle myself with sand and blood. Misfortune has been my god. I have stretched out in the mud. I have become dessicated in the air of crime. And I have played fine tricks with madness. Spring has taught me the idiot's hideous laughter."

What matters primarily is, of course, not the psychological or pathological aspect of these experiences, but the fact that young Rimbaud was able to turn them into poetry, even into great poetry.

III

Rimbaud's earliest poems are slightly reminiscent of Hugo and Coppée, of Chénier, of Banville and of the Parnassians in general. Yet the verve, the intensity, the evocative and suggestive power are not those of an apprentice. Only an accomplished poet could have written things like *Ophelia* and *Tête de Faune* with their sureness of touch and image. His mastery is further proved by the manner in which

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he so often combines emotional heat with a seeming coolness of treatment. Some of his pieces, particularly sonnets, are done in a realistic vein which has been likened to that of the best genre-pictures of the Dutch school: *Les Pauvres de l'Eglise*, for example, or the famous *Les Chercheuses de Poux*. The realism of his *Vénus Anadyomène*, however, reminds one more of Baudelaire. So does his *Bal des Pendus*—with an admixture of Daumier and Goya:

Messire Belzebuth tire par la cravate
Ses petits pantins noirs grimaçant sur le ciel,
Et, leur claquant au front un revers de savate,
Les fait danser, danser aux sons d'un vieux Noël.

Et les pantins choqués enlacent leurs bras grêles:
Comme des orgues noirs, les poitrines à jour
Que seraint autrefois les gentes demoiselles,
Se heurtent longuement dans un hideaux amour.

Hurrah! la bise siffle au grand bal des squelettes,
Le gibet noir mugit comme un orgue de fer!
Les loups vont répondant des forêts violettes;
A l'horizon, le ciel est d'un rouge enfer.

His political satires, on the other hand, are full of a personal mood and temper, to begin with *Paris se repeuple*, in which the young revolutionary and ex-communard hurls his indignation at the "settling

down" Paris—after the unsuccessful rising of 1871. A pendant to it is *Vertiges* (in *Les Illuminations*) with its call to universal anarchy and to destruction for its own sake.

Rimbaud's strongest element was, however, a kind of sensuous intimacy with Nature. His paganism was both more profound and more complicated than that of such fashionable pseudo-pagans as d'Annunzio or Oscar Wilde. But for this very reason he reacted all the more bitingly against his inherited notions of Christian sin, of renunciation, of charity and goodness. If Pan was one pole of his consciousness, Christ still remained—at least latently—the other. And his anti-Christian utterances were so violent because he was aware of the polar opposites within himself—an attitude similar to that of Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche, he, too, saw in Christ a "thief of energies", and in Christianity a personal problem which he wanted to suppress by the most radical counter-measures: whether pagan, immoralist, or otherwise. At the same time his blasphemous spite was strengthened by his own inverted religious temperament. His defiance came out as early as in his *Premières Communions*, and he completed it by his pagan Credo in *Soleil et Chair*:

Je crois en toi, je crois en toi, divine mère
Aphrodite marine! Oh, la route est amère,
Depuis que l'autre dieu nous attèle à sa croix!

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Rimbaud's anti-Christian fury was due not to a passionate will to health on the part of an invalid, as was the case with the latent Christian Nietzsche. On the contrary, it was the expression of a 'robust and at the same time anarchic self-will for which there existed neither law nor limit. What he had in common with Nietzsche, was his deep-rooted Christian instinct of which he wanted to rid himself no less than the prophet of Zarathustra. Yet whereas Nietzsche was anxious to impose upon his conquered "freedom" new supra-personal aims and obligations, Rimbaud plunged into his with the irresponsibility and the unguided impetus of a child. He seemed to revel in the very recklessness of his experiments and visions, which he nevertheless succeeded in exploiting as a poet. And in some of his works he exploited them with a verbal magic and a *rhythme expressif* which is almost miraculous.

His *Drunken Boat*, the French title of which, *Bateau Ivre*, sounds more suggestive, is an example. Dangerously near the line of flamboyant rhetoric, it still avoids its pitfalls and remains a verbal symphony worthy of Rimbaud's genius. Even a few lines are enough to show the power of this glowing confession in verse:

Je sais les cieux crevant en éclair et les trombes
Et les ressacs et les courants; je sais le soir,

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L'aube exaltée ainsi qu'un peuple de colombes,
Et j'ai vu quelquefois ce que l'homme a cru voir.

J'ai vu le soleil bas tâché d'horreurs mystiques
Illuminant de longs figements violets,
Pareils à des acteurs de drames très antiques
Les flots roulants au loin leur frisson de violets.

J'ai rêvé la nuit verte aux neiges éblouies,
Baisers montant aux yeux des mers avec lenteur,
La circulation des sèves inouïes
Et l'éveil jaune et bleu des phosphores chanteurs.

Later on, when Rimbaud's inner adventures became too confused and chaotic, they often resisted even his artistic power. They remained fixed half-way, as it were, between psychic "raw material" and its complete poetic re-creation. Such is partly the case with the contents of his two famous booklets, *Les Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer* (A Season in Hell). Yet for that very reason these two slender volumes are valuable as the clue to the crisis which eventually crushed Rimbaud the poet.

IV

Several pages in *Les Illuminations*, and perhaps even more in *Une Saison en Enfer*, read like the half-crystallized nightmares of an opium-eater who manages to keep his head cool even during his most irrational ecstasies and torments. Both are so packed

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with the "subconscious", with flashes of intimate experiences, memories, impressions and hallucinations, that they defy all traditional form. Rimbaud must have written them in haste, as though anxious to release some inner pressure which he found unendurable. He forgets the reader to such an extent as to hurl him, without any warning, beyond all known reality and logic. In order to make any sense out of his babble one must accustom oneself, not only to Rimbaud's style, but also to a kind of disturbing light which keeps on hissing and flashing from some distant mad corner of the human soul.

As an intimate confession—of the sort one makes only to oneself at rare and exceptionally critical moments—*A Season in Hell* is of importance. It is a record of Rimbaud's excursions into those regions where one touches upon the fundamentals of man; where the human ego is stripped of all restraint, and risks being destroyed by its own anarchic "freedom". Such a danger becomes even more imminent to those who have entered the realm illicitly, i.e., by means of self-imposed "derangements", by drugs and perversions. A richly endowed spirit in particular is faced here, sooner or later, by unexpected shocks and terrors, as well as by that impotent and self-castigating weariness for which there is often no name in human language. Here are a few

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passages, taken from one of the fragments (translated by G. F. Lees):

"We are outside the world. There is not a single sound. My sense of feeling has disappeared. Oh, my chateaux, my Saxony, my willow-wood. The evenings, mornings, nights, days. . . . How tired I am!

"I was bound to have my hell for anger, my hell for pride—and the hell consequent on caresses. A veritable concert of hells.

"I am dying of weariness. The tomb awaits me. I am travelling to that horror of horrors—the worms. Satan, old blade, you wish to dissolve me with your charms. I demand, I demand!—a prod with your pitchfork and a drop of fire.

"Ah! once more to ascend to life! To look on our deformities. And this poison, this thousand-times cursed kiss! My weakness and the world's cruelty! My God, pity! Hide me. I made too poor a resistance!—I am hidden and yet I am not.

"The fire is flaring up with its damned one."

V

It is not without interest that in *A Season in Hell*—that farewell to his poetic career—Rimbaud tries to reach the essentials of his own self and also of poetry. Words are no longer labels upon things, but magical equivalents of things. Wishing to abolish all intermediaries between words and the senses, he

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replaces even syntax by "verbal alchemy"—thus illustrating his own principle (subsequently endorsed by so many moderns) that the discoveries a poet makes "must be felt, touched, heard. If the material he brings back from below has form, he gives it form; if it has no form, he makes it formless." (Letter to P. Demeny.)

As a result, Rimbaud's pages look as disjointed as the experiences recorded. They are fragmentary, and if not illogical—at least outside logic. According to Paul Claudel, Rimbaud's thought proceeds here no longer along the line of logical development, but "comme chez un musicien, par desseins mélodiques et rapports de notes juxtaposées". The nearest approach or even the exact equivalent to it is found however in the modern *surréaliste* current. One of its leaders, André Breton, defines *surréalisme* as "psychic automatism by means of which one wants to express, either by spoken word, by writing, or otherwise the real function of thought. It is the rendering of thought in complete absence of control on the part of reason, and devoid of any other preoccupation, whether æsthetic or moral". Hence it is not accidental that Rimbaud's vogue coincided with the cult of the subconscious and of Bergson. In the same way as his *goût du pervers* links him not only to Baudelaire but also to André Gide and Marcel Proust, his "psychic automatism" brings him close to a number

of ultra-moderns both in Europe and in America.

Owing to their logical gaps, ambiguity and vagueness, Rimbaud's fragments can be filled with all sorts of guesses. In *A Season in Hell* even the strains of a Christian mystic have been discovered—by Rimbaud's sister and her husband M. Berrichon, as well as by Paul Claudel. The truth is that the booklet, being a replica of his own chaotic inner life, can be interpreted from almost any point of view, including that of a mystic. Rimbaud's "mysticism" was however as inverted as was his religious instinct. Fostered by the already mentioned inner polarity on the one hand, and by his self-will on the other, it was of a rebellious "Satanic" kind. His chief spiritual impulse was not towards the mystical, but to its exact opposite—the magical.

A mystic is the man who surrenders his self to higher powers as their passive receptacle and instrument in one. A "magician" on the other hand wants to subject those very powers to his own ends, to his self-will. Thus, invariably he drags them down to his own plane. And the lower this plane, the more destructive they become. In this way the magical impulse lands one's consciousness in open or disguised "satanism" which is the reverse of mysticism. Yet for this very reason the former, if pushed to its farthest limits, can approach (from the other end) its mystical and Christian opposite, since in the realm

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of Spirit, too, the extremes touch one another.

That was what happened to Rimbaud during his inner crisis. And as the crisis itself overwhelmed him at a period when his spiritual confusion had already become too great and too painful for any solution, he fled from the battle-field like a deserter, leaving there his poetic genius—turned to ashes.

VI

Rimbaud's creative urge was born of his inner daring, reactions and adventures. While haunted by the Infinite and at the same time drawn towards it irresistibly, he yet rejected any guiding principle except that of egotistic caprice, self-will and conceit—until he became a victim of his own haphazard *chasse spirituelle*.¹ Pushed by his daring further and further, he often "holed the Heavens" (his own expression), thus forcing his consciousness to break into those regions for which it was not ripe. Hence instead of liberation through art, he only knew spiritual recklessness and licence to which he took as one takes to drugs. What he regarded as inner freedom was but that irresponsible chaos of his in which supra-human and sub-human elements were interwoven like the undergrowth of the jungle.

Every man has the right only to those inner ex-

¹ Such was the title of one of his lost works, written between *Les Illuminations* and *Une Saison en Enfer*.

periences which his consciousness can bear and assimilate for its further growth. If he trespasses this right, he does so on his own responsibility. It is here that the farthest regions of Spirit become also the most dangerous. Rimbaud became aware of this when it was already too late to cope with the danger. It was due precisely to his spiritual impetuosity that he was landed in his own "hell" where he risked complete inner disintegration and madness.

In *A Season in Hell* one feels at times the author's impotent desire to get rid of his chaos, to find some foothold in toil, in religion—no matter where. Unable to achieve this, he was compelled either to face the consequences, or else to get rid of it all deliberately, by running away from it, *even if that should involve a lowering of his consciousness.*

Rimbaud chose the second course, and he was right in calling it a *chute* (downfall). It was more than that: a spiritual and also a literary suicide—since his best poetry was but a record of his spiritual adventures. Having deserted his Spirit, he thus inevitably deserted also art and poetry which now lost all sense for him. *Maintenant je puis dire que l'art est une sottise.* After three years of intense creative activity, he thus blew out his poetic genius in cold blood and with such determination that never again did he show any interest in his poems.

His inner restlessness was now replaced by a

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long physical vagabondage. Then followed his trading career in Africa, the final aim of which was to become a *petit rentier* somewhere in the French provinces—respectable and safely married. He confessed this quite candidly in a letter he wrote to his mother from Harrar in 1883. "Alas, what's the use of all this running to and fro, of all these fatigues, and these languages I stuff my memory with, and these inconveniences without name, if I am not allowed one day, in a few years time, to settle down in a place which would please me, more or less, to found a family and to have at least a son. . . ."

Seven years later, when he was already a fairly prosperous business man in Abyssinia, this iconoclast actually asked, in another letter to his mother, if he could come home in the following spring and look for a suitable wife in his native district.

He did come, but only as an incurable invalid. And to complete the circle of his contradictions, he died a resigned and repentant Christian in the hospital of Marseilles.

THE RETURN OF PAN

THE RETURN OF PAN (ON KNUT HAMSDUN)

I

AN attentive reader of Knut Hamsun's works is almost invariably struck by his mixture of two incongruous and at the first glance incompatible elements. One of them is the freshness of a man of the soil; and the other, the introspective brooding of a "decadent" who is familiar with some of the most tortuous nuances and contradictions of the human soul. Hailing from an old peasant family, Hamsun preserved, through all his restless adventures in Scandinavia and in America, that innate bond with the soil which is typical of true peasantry. Hence his intimacy with nature, his atavistic mistrust of town and town culture. Yet the character of his work was largely determined by his close contact with town and its civilization. Or rather by his reaction against them. Having passed through all the emotional and mental experiences which they could offer him, he turned his back on them—in the name of the soil, of Nature. The hackneyed formula, Nature *versus* Civilization, thus became one of his favourite and most frequent themes.

What makes much of Hamsun's writing so quaint

and original is precisely this blending of a fresh "racial" flavour with an elusive and sophisticated personal touch—a blending reminiscent of Grieg's music. His passages often vibrate with something pristine, as though saturated with the voice of the great Pan himself. But together with this, he can indulge in morbid psychological dissections, and in a style the very cadences of which suggest the hectic, self-lacerated *fin de siècle*.

Hamsun's first novel, *Hunger* (1890), brought a powerful new note into Scandinavian literature. It was powerful by its manner and even more by its subject-matter—the plight of a talented youth drifting towards death from starvation in the middle of a busy modern capital. The book, which is a splendid piece of self-analysis, reads like a delirium of hunger and prostration. Or like a nightmare in which the dividing line between normal and abnormal is ignored. The author introduces us at once into the region of pathologic elements, and keeps us there for the most part of the narrative. As the book is based on personal experiences of Hamsun himself, it never strikes a false note. The downtrodden sufferer stands before us in all his tragedy, the intensity of which is increased by his mocking tone. Crushed by hunger, by the meanest people and surroundings, he often lingers on the verge of self-pity, but his challenging spirit does not allow him to resign himself entirely

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or to whine. He protests instead against fate, against his tormentors, against all those conditions in which he feels so irrevocably uprooted and doomed, until he is saved at last, by sheer chance, from his ordeal.

From this point on, the unadapted and unadaptable individual became, for a long time, Hamsun's main hero. In some respects he is the Scandinavian counterpart of the Russian "superfluous man" in a new setting. In Hamsun's books he had to pass through Nagel (*Mysteries*) and Glahn (*Pan*), before he was portrayed in *Dreamers* (*Svaermere*) in the gayest vein, with a picture of country manners in the background. In the two later volumes, *Under the Autumn Stars* (1906) and *With Muted Strings* (1909), we meet him as an elderly tramp saddened by the passing of life, while in *Children of the Age* (1913) and *Segelfoss Town* he emerges in the sinister *déraciné*, Baardsen. Lost in the surrounding world, this type displays a complete lack of conventions. Moody and sometimes bitterly morbid, he is fond of extravagances, of unaccountable escapades and caprices. Yet, when trying to seize his essence, we often seize not so much a palpable character as a bundle of nerves, of psychological fragments and contradictions.

II

A typical instance is Hamsun's second book, *Mysteries*. It is a jerky, loose and "cleverly" stammering novel, pieced together with casual impressions, bits of atmosphere, monologues and conversations, with Johannes Nagel and his sudden love for Dagny in the centre. Once more, Hamsun treads—although less convincingly than in *Hunger*—in that "Dostoevskian" borderland where man is at the mercy of the mysterious forces hidden in his consciousness. But whereas Dostoevsky's pathology is concerned with a spiritual quest, Hamsun is interested in the shades and filaments of the "nerves". What attracts him is the sudden irrational whims, or else the paradoxical inner confusion of moods, of an undermined will.

Nagel, that sensitive and self-centred "modern", is tossed between all sorts of contradictions. One could take him for a genius *manqué*, a monomaniac, a romantic misanthrope, a posing charlatan, a mild lunatic. The reader loses all reliable clue, and ceases to distinguish (like the hero himself) between his sincerity and his pose. The book should be called not *Mysteries*, but *Mystifications*, as one of its Scandinavian critics aptly remarked. There is practically no action in the novel. What we see is a static collection of moments, of "slices of life", such as can be found in a small coast town with its busybodies, gossips and conventions—the background which plays an

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important part in Hamsun's later novels of manners.

In his subsequent two narratives, *Editor Lynge* and *Shallow Soil* (both of them set in the Norwegian capital) Hamsun adopted a less subjective method. Yet it was here that his "nature" bias asserted itself, for the first time, in an attack upon the corrupt and artificial city life. He also became openly didactic. A deeper and more artistic expression of that trend, one finds, however, in his next book, *Pan*, which is perhaps the best known of his early works.

The hero of the story, Lieutenant Glahn, is again as puzzling and restless as the one of *Hunger*, or of *Mysteries*. But this time the unadaptable individual tries to come to terms with life through a return to Nature, to the pantheistic oneness with all creation. Hamsun's book, while intensely introspective and egotistic, is on the other hand full of dithyrambs in praise of such oneness. As fragrant as wild flowers (at least when read in the original), many of its pages seem to be permeated with "the blood of all Nature seething", with the breath of the great Pan himself.

"All things quiet and still. I lay that evening looking out of the window. There was a fairy glimmer at that hour over wood and field; the sun had gone down, and dyed the horizon with a rich red light, that stood there still as oil. The sky all open and clean; I stared into that clear sea, and it seemed as if I were

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lying face to face with the uttermost depth of the world; my heart beating tensely against it, and at home there. God knows, I thought to myself, God knows why the sky is dressed in gold and mauve to-night; if there is not some festival up in the world, some great feast with music from the stars, and boats gliding along the river ways. It looks so!—And I close my eyes, and follow with the boats, and thoughts floated through my mind. . . .”

The book is a worthy predecessor of Hamsun's later tribute to Pan—*Growth of the Soil*. It can also serve as an introduction to another element of Hamsun's creations: his peculiar erotics. While the Pan-element entices the brooding lieutenant (through his very exaltations) into a vegetative pre-individual harmony, the capricious and complicated modern Eros suddenly destroys all that harmony in a manner which is quite typical of the author's own conception of love and sex.

III

In this respect, too, Hamsun shows a mixture of the depersonalizing primary “libido” with a highly individualized personal passion. The first makes many of his characters impulsive and wildly sensual—as though obsessed by Pan; the second however develops their introspection, their shyness and fastidiousness.

Intertwined in one and the same person, the two

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may lead to a number of contradictions and puzzles, in which Hamsun the psychologist takes a great interest. And he delights most of all in the masks of Eros; in that pretended or actual hostility which is so frequent an undercurrent of love.

Already Nagel (in *Mysteries*) was making a fool of himself, not in order to reveal, but in order to conceal his feelings for Dagny. So did the hero of *Hunger* while in love. This reserve we find invariably in Hamsun's lovers. They pretend to be indifferent when they most attract each other. It is a hide-and-seek which enables the author to display all kinds of psychological half-tones, of "between the lines", and even of cruel pranks on the part of Eros.

For Hamsun's Eros is cruel. He revels in love that wounds. And also in love wounding itself through an excess of pride and shyness. Such is the motive of the author's most ambitious dramatic attempt, *Munken Vendt*—a work reminiscent of *Peer Gynt*, but inferior to it both in conception and treatment. The very reticence of Hamsun's lovers often comes from an impulse to lacerate their own passion in order to enjoy it through its negative intensity; through pain and suffering which verge, now and then, on masochism. "One can be dragged by the hair over hill and dale, and if any asks what is happening one can answer in ecstasy: 'I am dragged by the hair.' And if any asks: 'But shall I not

help you, release you?' one answers: 'No.' And if they ask: 'But how can you endure it?' one answers: 'I can endure it, for I love the hand that drags me.' ”
(*Pan.*)

It is through aspects such as these that Hamsun burrows in the secrets of erotics. And however much he may exalt the sentimental-romantic side of love (in *Victoria*), he still prefers to deal with it on the plane of elementary “libido”. Love as an overwhelming sexual obsession is crudely expressed in his story, *The Voice of Life*: a young woman spends a passionate love night with a stranger beside the room in which the corpse of her aged husband is lying on the bier. As soon as Hamsun abandons the romantic love, he usually falls into the other extreme, into sheer sensuality. The number of Hamsun’s sensualists—such as Mack in *Pan*, *Benoni*, and *Rosa*—is considerable, not only among his men, but also among women. He portrays a few fastidious heroines. But he is more alive and more convincing when dealing with such irresponsibly carnal types as Fru Kareno (in the play, *Before the Gate of the Kingdom*), Teresita (in its continuation, *The Game of Life*), the ageing Edwarda (in *Rosa*), Barbro, and partly Inger (in *Growth of the Soil*), Oliver’s wife (in *The Women at the Pump*), Ane Maria (in *Wanderers*), and many others.

The intensity of life means to Hamsun’s sensualists

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the intensity and gratification of that sexual energy which simmers in their blood. Once this is gone, life itself begins to fade away in their eyes. Their only prospect is old age with no compensation whatever, since "age brings nothing but age. . . . One says that with old age there come other joys which one had not before—deeper, truer joys. That's a sheer lie . . ."

It would be difficult to find a more cruel tragedy of old age than Hamsun's *Sunset* (*Aftenrøde*)¹, the concluding piece of his dramatic trilogy. Like a true peasant, Hamsun seems to think that a man has lost all once the strength of youth and manhood is gone. And strength means to him, for the most part, the vitality of sex and passion. As long as this is alive, man is alive. Even a distorted and chaotic vitality of the sort is preferable to no vitality at all. That is why his sensualists cling to it as long as they can. The transition to old age is a real tragedy for them. A compulsory passing into a stale and gloomy limbo-world. The sad helplessness of such a transition breathes from the pages of *Under the Autumn Stars*, *With Muted Strings*, and of *The Last Joy*, while the final struggle with it is brutally rendered in the play, *In the Grip of Life* (*Livet ivolt*).

Such an idea of erotics is quite akin to that of the

¹ There is also an equally satirical poem under the same title in his collection of poems, *Wild Chorus* (*Wildt Kor*, 1904 and 1921).

"natural man". Yet Hamsun makes it clear that love becomes depraved only through the contact with town and civilization. Isak and Inger (*Growth of the Soil*) live in the early years of their marriage "like birds or beasts." But their love is innocent; a healthy, spontaneous voice of nature. Inger becomes depraved only later, while imprisoned in the town where she loses her balance and her freshness. An even more warning example of the civilizing effects of the town is the servant girl Barbro, the murderess of her two illegitimate children.

Town and civilization are thus interpreted by Hamsun as agents of corruption. And, in his opinion, woman is more easily tainted by it than man, since she is "poor in mind, but rich in irresponsibility; like a child in many ways, but with nothing of its innocence." The light-headed Inger regains her stability only long after her return to the wilds, when she has become rooted once more in the soil, and has forgotten all about the ways of the town. So the fundamental bias of Knut Hamsun comes out even in his attitude towards erotics.

IV

The erotic "libido" as the vital sap and fountain-head of life, on the one hand, and the open or tacit rejection of all those factors which tear one away from the soil, from the "great Pan", on the other

—such are the two converging motives of Hamsun's creations. We find them not only in his early books, but also in his later and more objective novels of manners, which begin—roughly—with *Benoni* and *Rosa* (1908), and are followed by a number of novels, including most of his later and latest books.

An apparent detachment and a kind of epic quiet, coupled with a reserved but amusingly good-natured pity, almost reminiscent of Chekhov, are typical of these works. Having abandoned his impressionistic jerkiness, Hamsun in no way lessens his suggestive power, or the peculiar tone and twinkle behind which he can conceal a great deal of irony—Barbro's trial (*Growth of the Soil*) is an example. Instead of concentrating upon a single hero as before, he now prefers to dwell more on the background, and to depict the entire panorama of life. Yet the angle from which he observes and interprets it is still prompted by his former dilemma of *Soil versus Civilization*. The dilemma now becomes even more straightforward than in any of his previous works as we can see it in novels such as *Children of the Age* and *Segelfoss Town*.

In these two books we follow the gradual transformation of a primitive rural community into an industrial town—with all the economic, moral and social consequences incumbent upon such a change.

The semi-feudal aristocrat, Willatz-Holmsen, is

supplanted in his own district by the enriched upstart, Holmengraa. The result is a bustling centre of local industry, with its shopkeepers, officials, clerks, its labour, even with its "press". . . . Hamsun is only too glad to point out the negative aspects of the metamorphosis. The malice with which he describes the "educated" village lad and the subsequent pastor ("with the makings of a bishop"), Lassen, is unforgettable. The erotic element, with the usual Hamsunesque hide-and-seek, though salient in both books, yields this time to their social side, or even social message. And the sudden bankruptcy of the industrial enterprise, together with the plight of the increased community which now has to face a future without work, without food, reads almost like a symbolic warning.

In these, and in most of his later works, there are pages of discussions about land, industry, culture—discussions which often sound as though interpolated on purpose. All that fosters the town civilization with its grabbing industrialism, its dry intellectual type of man, is hateful to him. The only salvation is in clinging to the soil, in the deep and simple rootedness. Was not Rosa's first husband, Arentsen (in *Benoni, Rosa*), who had passed through a university, the embodiment of shallowness and cynicism in comparison with the solidly rooted yokel, Benoni? Hamsun distrusts, moreover, the entire modern educa-

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tion in so far as it severs people from the soil. No less does he distrust that semi-education which tries to raise the general level of the masses to that of the town. And as to those "educated" workers who have been already infected by the industrial town mentality, he speaks of them with disapproval, even with scorn, which does not mean of course that he himself has grasped the working-class problem. They "do nothing for the inward welfare of others, they have not been able to cultivate any ethical sympathy. They make a pretence of social instinct and do not possess even that. They want to roar and turn things upside down, and when it comes to a pinch even their own leaders cannot hold them in. And then we see what a human travesty such an industrial worker becomes when he has learnt the tricks of the class above him: he leaves his boat, leaves his land, leaves his home, parents, brothers and sisters, leaves the beasts, the trees, the flowers, the sea, God's high heaven—and gets in exchange the Tivoli, the clubhouse, the tavern, bread and circuses. For these benefits he chooses the proletarian life. And then he roars: 'We working men!'"

Such and similar outbursts occur in *Women at the Pump*—a novel in which Hamsun lavishes all his artistic skill on the petty "crawling existence" of an industrial coast town—with the crippled eunuch Oliver as its hero. The atmosphere of stifling

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vulgarity, of void and boredom, is at times past endurance, and the book reads almost like a deliberate contrast to Hamsun's previous novel, *Growth of the Soil* (Markens Gröde, 1917).

V

This book, one of his greatest achievements, is as typical of later Hamsun as *Pan* is of his earlier period. But while showing us the author's art at its best, it also points out his message, both directly and indirectly, more fully than any other work of his. Its theme is: Man and the Soil. And the novel itself is an epic of this relationship.

Isak, the lonely settler of the wild forest land of Sellanraa, is a simple patriarchal figure. Far away from civilization, he is one with the mother Earth, who rewards his labours a thousandfold. It is not the "acquisitive" instinct of a *kulak* that makes him grow rich and rooted, but his love of the soil, and the pride he takes in recovering it from the wilds. The only troubles he knows are those which come from civilization. It took years before Inger, his wife, got over the bad effects of the town. In contrast to his elder son, Sivers, the younger Eliseus, who had spent his boyhood amidst the civilized conditions of a town, became sapped for the rest of his days. There was "something unfortunate, ill-fated about this young man, as if something were rotting him from within:

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the child had lost his roothold, and suffered thereby. All that he turns to now leads him back to something wanting in him, something dark against the light." Finally he goes to America and disappears without trace, like a torn leaf in the wind.

Amidst all the adversities and trials; amidst the encroaching industrialism which claims a larger and larger area of the countryside, Isak stands firm as a rock. And it is in him and his like that Hamsun finds at last fullness, grandeur, and a sense of life. His mouthpiece, Geissler, is clear about that when sermonizing to Sivers:

"Look at you folk at Sellanraa, now: looking up at blue peaks every day of your lives; no new-fangled inventions about that, but field and rocky peaks, rooted deep in the past—but you've them for companionship. There you are, living in touch with heaven and earth, one with them, one with all these wide, deep-rooted things. No need for a sword in your hands, you go through life bareheaded, barehanded, in the midst of great kindliness. Look, Nature's there, for you and yours to have and enjoy. Man and Nature don't bombard each other, but go together. There's you, Sellanraa folk, in all this, living there. Field and forest, moors and meadows, and sky and stars—oh, 'tis not poor and sparingly counted out, but without measure. You've everything to live on, everything to live for, everything

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to believe in; being born and bringing forth, you are the needful on earth. 'Tis you that maintain life. Generation to generation, breeding for ever; and when you die, the new stock goes on. That's the meaning of eternal life."

VI

This is how Hamsun's Pan comes back again—in order to turn into a god of vegetative patriarchal group-life, barricaded against civilization. He becomes domesticated, tame and toiling, occasionally even pious. He still preserves his goat-legs, of course, but they are hidden beneath home-spun cloth and home-made boots. Rousseau's idealized savage has thus been promoted to the idealized yokel—in the name of priority of Nature over industrial civilization.

This priority Hamsun reiterates with due emphasis in his novel, *The Last Chapter*, through the contrast of Daniel and Fleming. He does the same even more emphatically in *Wanderers*: Hamsun's usual panorama of small people and small events, but with the pulsation of the great mysterious life underneath—regionalism *sub specie aeterni*. Against the background of Norwegian Nordland we watch a number of "wanderers": people who have detached themselves from the soil and, unable to get rooted anywhere, only squander their vitality together with all that is

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best in them. The unstable and amusingly cranky August (the chief character) is a born vagabond. Others however become so step by step: through poverty, through trade, or through America—as was the case with Edevart's sweetheart Lovisa. She went to America as fresh as a flower; but after a few years she came back a lewd suburban snob, with her "roots torn up from the soil where she had grown, and now she belonged everywhere—nowhere. . . ." August's loyal friend, Edveart, too, "had himself been uprooted by his wanderings, had become scattered in his spirit and had lost his grip on life. Nothing any longer seemed important to him. . . ." A symbolic contrast to them all is, however, the yokel Ezra—a budding Isak.

In Hamsun's recent book, *August*, we follow the destinies of the same characters, as well as of the same village Polden, about twenty years after. The village itself, with its sudden "commercial" prosperity and its subsequent famine is another variation of the Segelfoss-theme; of the struggle between "progress" on the one hand, and the solid rootedness in the soil on the other. August, the finely drawn representative of "civilization" (who has returned to his native village after his long wanderings in all parts of the world) only helps to point out the innate solidity of such yokels as Ezra and Joakim. In contrast to their toil all the bustling activities of August remain as negative

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and sterile as the man himself. "What then was lacking in his life? Perhaps nothing save this, that in every thing and in every way he was simply a vagabond come home again. He has become a total stranger to himself; he has rejected his birthright: the soil of his fathers. Gone too—ay, vanished completely—are all those rich superstitions and prejudices which once had been part of his soul's estate. His spiritual life has withered into nothingness and poor he has become beyond all belief." How different is the peasant Ezra, or Joakim, who "firmly treading the soil of home is healthy in mind, satisfied and happy and strong! He has never wandered far, far away from his doorstep and been out in the world and learned the true nature of ruin".

One could quote a number of pages from Ham-sun's books—pages which prove beyond doubt that their author is perhaps the greatest representative of what might be called the "back to soil and Nature" trend in modern letters.¹ His is the instinctive reaction against the machine and the machine-age. Devoid of the moralizing tendency (in a Christian

¹ This may explain also his consistent hatred of the American and the Anglo-Saxon mentality. His very debut (before *Hunger*) was a pamphlet containing one of the most biting attacks on American civilization. The references to the British in his works are not flattering either, whereas he shows a curious, instinctive liking for the Russians (expressed particularly in his rather mediocre travel book, *In the Fairy Land*, dealing with his journey to the Caucasus). He is also a great admirer of Russian literature.

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sense) of Tolstoy and Rousseau, he is almost as vehement as they in his hatred of town and culture. He also succumbs to the same error in identifying culture with pseudo-culture. He ignores the fact that town, as a civilizing agent, disrupts the vegetative patriarchal life "rooted deep in the past", not necessarily for the sake of a general disintegration, but also in order to make man conquer, sooner or later, a new and broader rootedness; rootedness not in the "soil" only, but in the whole of mankind; not in the past, but in the creative present and future.

Hamsun looks backwards and not forwards. Like the old romantics, he projects his will and longing into a state of consciousness that belongs to the primitive past. Pan, as he conceives him, is an outlived idol in a modern garb. For we can no longer go *back* to nature, but only *forward* to it—a thing which is essentially different from Hamsun's impulse. What we need is the simplicity which has absorbed and transcended civilization; not the one which is vainly trying to eliminate it. Yet while rejecting Hamsun's trend, we can still be grateful for that art which has grown to some extent out of it. After all, it is Hamsun the author that matters. And his writings remain in many ways unique even when inspired by his atavistic and at times much too parochial bias.

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I

ALTHOUGH the poetic work of Alexander Blok is striking and original enough to defy any labels, some of its aspects can best be understood if treated in connection with the Russian symbolism. The latter came mainly out of that "decadent" current whose devotees were anxious to raise the formal standard of poetry, and also to free the literature of their country from various social and other purposes. Realizing the dangers of too narrow an "art for art's sake" (combined with an equally narrow egotism, derived from Nietzsche), a few members of that group began to champion a deeper conception and a religious affirmation of life. This effort had to pass through numerous literary as well as philosophic ventures and adventures, before it crystallized—during the first few years of the present century—into a definite movement, and reached its height in such poets as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Andrey Biely, and Alexander Blok.

One of the characteristics of that movement was a strong impulse to go beyond mere art and literature, and to create a new consciousness, a new man. Such an aim was bound however to come into contact

with the religious thought of Russia: with that of Dostoevsky, and also of Vladimir Solovyev—a remarkable thinker who had been working (during the last quarter of the nineteenth century) towards an harmonious union of art, philosophy, religion and life. Utopian as he was, Solovyev dreamed of a universal regeneration through love, and through such an inner change as would lead mankind to what he called the “integral fullness of existence”.¹

His literary work was a sincere endeavour to unify all constructive aspects of modern mentality for the sake of such fullness. Unfortunately, his philosophic training did not entirely save him from the fallacies of those romantics who, instead of unifying such elements as thought, emotion, science, religion, philosophy and art, only confused them, that is, blurred the boundaries between them. Deeply versed in European and Eastern thought, in the teaching of the gnostics, as well as in Christian mysticism, Solovyev recorded his spiritual strivings, not only in his philosophic essays, but also in several poems, since his involved theories did not kill the poet in him. With his belief that “all transient things are but symbols”; with his visionary power and his will to change the present-day man, he may justly be called

¹ An essay on Solovyev by the present author can be found in the recently published *Plato. A Study by Vladimir Solovyev*. (Stanley Nott.)

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the first important representative of the Russian symbolism proper (as distinct from the French symbolism, for example, which was concerned chiefly with new methods of poetic expression). And Solovyev's influence is conspicuous most of all in Alexander Blok—the towering figure of that school.

II

It sounds like a paradox that Alexander Blok, who is now regarded as the greatest Russian modernist, had practically no idea of modern poetry until he was eighteen. The favourite reading of his youth was the dreamy Zhukovsky, and those German romantics with whom he felt a certain affinity. Of decisive importance for his development was, however, his acquaintance with Solovyev's works. These were largely responsible for the trend, perhaps even for the awakening, of his poetic genius. Like Solovyev, he identified the "World-Soul", or the "Sophia", of the gnostics with the mystical Eternal Feminine from which he began to expect a kind of salvation and a transfiguration of life, with all his erotic ardour. His awakened sex turned thus entirely within, to the phantoms conjured up by his own poetic imagery. He not only thought—he actually felt Love to be the key to the mystery of life and the universe. And the result of his inspirations was one of the most accomplished romantic books in

modern literature: his *Verses about the Lady Fair*.

These first poems of his, which appeared in 1905, blend Solovyev's visionary yearning for the miraculous with the erotic dreaminess of a Novalis, and the music of Shelley with the tenderness of Dante's *Vita Nuova*. They are like the prayers of a troubadour singing the praise of the Eternal Feminine. Unaware of the world around, he sings like a man in a trance, or like a medium whose very passivity is one of the causes of his intoxication. His images are vague as if enveloped in a haze; but they are suggestive by their vagueness, as well as by Blok's uncanny sense for the "aura" of words and symbols. His language may still be reminiscent at times of Solovyev, but the melody is entirely his own. And it reveals already a treasury of new rhythms, of new musical and prosodic devices.

It was above all Solovyev the mystic that hovered like a guardian spirit over Blok's poetry of that period. Yet the prayer-like serenity of those early poems (he wrote about eight hundred of them before he was twenty-five) was disturbed, more than once, by sudden flashes of the opposite depth: that of spiritual split and descent, of disappointment, of rebellion, indicated so far only in terms of foreboding and of fear.

I am afraid of my double-faced soul,
And I carefully conceal

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My diabolic and wild face
Underneath this sacred armour.

Aware of such a danger, he clung the more fervently to his mystical Beatrice. But his premonitions that the inevitable was bound to happen are uttered in a number of poems, and above all in these verses, addressed to her.

I have foreknown Thee! Oh, I have foreknown Thee.
Going,

The years have shown me Thy premonitory face.
Intolerably clear, the farthest sky is glowing.
I wait in silence Thy withheld and worshipped grace!
The farthest sky is glowing: white for Thy appearing.
Yet terror clings to me: Thy image will be strange.
And insolent suspicion will arouse upon Thy nearing.
The features long foreknown, beheld at last will change.
How shall I then be fallen!—low, with no defender:
Dead dreams will conquer me, the glory, glimpsed,
will change.

The farthest sky is glowing! Nearer looms the splendour.
Yet terror clings to me. Thy image will be strange.¹

III

What happened was in fact a complete change of her image, resulting from the split between the actual life and Blok's inner vision of life. To follow this

¹ Translated by Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky in *Modern Russian Anthology* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., M. Lawrence).

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mutation means to penetrate into the tragedy of Blok the man and the poet, for as a true Russian he never made a distinction between the two.

In an essay written in 1910 (during the growing crisis of Russian symbolism) Blok gives a flowery and yet carefully veiled explanation of what had taken place. He deals in it with spiritual realities only; but as these are treated in their intersection with his poetic activities on the one hand, and with the actual life around on the other, Blok touches upon the problem of Art and Life in some of its acutest "personal" aspects. He realized soon enough that the phantom of his Beatrice had been turned into a vague myth which, instead of bridging, only widened the gap between the actual and the transcendental. The myth became, moreover, untenable as soon as Blok was compelled to descend into the region of concrete love and of the concrete everyday existence. The two worlds—the world of values and the world of facts—proved incompatible at once. There even was no guarantee that his glowing visions of old had not been mere subjective fancies, instead of intuitions with a higher reality behind them.

In this state of doubt and bewilderment, Blok was assailed by a swarm of "doubles" which had been dormant in him as an antithesis to the former dreamer. A further complication may have been due to his

disappointment in his married life from which he had expected a miracle that never came. Be this as it may, he suddenly found himself cut off from the "streaming light" of those regions where his imagination had soared before. And on the plane of actual life his Lady Fair became an impossibility, a phantom. His visions now appeared as unreal to him as a puppet show.

"If I painted a picture of it", he confesses in his essay, "I would depict it in this manner: in the lilac dusk of an endless world there sways an enormous white catafalque, and on it lies a doll whose face is dimly reminiscent of the countenance which once had shone through the heavenly dawns. . . . And so all is finished: my miraculous world has turned into the arena of my personal acting—into a puppet-show in which I myself act in the company of my strange puppets. In other words, my own life has become art. . . . I stand before it all without knowing what to do either with the show, or with my life turned into art; for in my immediate presence there lives my own phantom-creation: neither alive nor dead—a blue ghost. . . . It is here that arises the problem of the curse of art, of a return to life, of service to the community. . . ."

Blok is here confronted with the problem of art and life, not from the angle of "æstheticism", but from that of the life-values which he is unable to

find on the plane of life itself. Having lost his romantic faith, he has still preserved all his romantic temperament and nostalgia which was now beginning to play a regular spiritual havoc with him. To the question as to what to do in such a situation, he answers that there might be "several horrid outlets", but such an answer is in itself an evasion. It is all the more interesting to study in this light the whole of Blok's subsequent poetry. For his work became henceforth a strange psychological and human document.

Blok's lyrical play, "The Puppet Show" (*Balaganchik*, 1905), was one of his first successful attempts to ridicule his former visionary phase by means of a buffoonery. In another little play, "The Unknown Lady" (*Neznakomka*), he lets his mystical Beatrice—symbolized as a star—fall down on to our earth where she becomes an ordinary prostitute. In a haunting poem under the same title (written a few years later) we find her in a suburban tavern near Petrograd. In black silk and in a hat with ostrich feathers, she sits there every night, and surrounded by drunkards, still emanates the mystery of another world:

And in my brain the soft slow fluttering
Of ostrich feathers waves once more;
And fathomless the azure glittering
Where two eyes blossom on the shore.

ALEXANDER BLOK

But glimpses of the sort are accessible to the poet only through drunkenness, through wine. In wine alone he still recovers, now and then, his lost visions for which he yearns in the squalor of existence all the more strongly the less he believes in their reality. A general feature of Blok's love poems is that in all the women he sings, he still wishes to find a reflection of his vanished Beatrice, whereby he only widens the gap between the ideal and the real.

IV

Such moods on the part of Blok coincided with the general gloom and despondency after the abortive revolution of 1905. The atmosphere of emptiness, of nihilism, of a cynical *après nous le déluge*, grew in intensity year after year—until the great explosion of 1917 took place. And this background strengthened the poignancy of Blok's poetry which now became, more than ever, a diary of his intimate experiences.

The early phase of Blok's poetry was that of an ecstatic trance from which he had a rude awakening. But when deprived of the ecstasies of the height, and unable to continue his "puppet-show" as though his subjective phantoms were the real thing, he yet refused any compromise with reality. He plunged instead into the lower depths of the subconscious and began to drug himself with the emotional chaos

of the "psychics". The ecstasy of despair he preferred to no ecstasy at all. Had he found a religious outlet, or else had he been shallow enough to adopt the gospel of the "æsthetes", he would have been spared that pessimism which henceforth clung to him for good. For the only intensity he knew from now on was the intensity of negation. But even in this mood and on this level Blok needed a substitute for his Beatrice. And he discovered it in a new beloved to whom he transferred all his disappointed yearning, as well as his passion for the unfathomable and the boundless. This new beloved of his was Russia. Not the "holy", but the irrational Russia of endless spaces, of winds and blizzards, of flying *troikas*, of maddening nostalgia, drunkenness, poverty and chaos.

I will listen to the voice of drunken Russia,
And I will rest under a tavern roof.

Snow-masks—such is the title of his first book of that period. And its main note is the one of intoxication. Intoxication with blizzards, with wine and with morbid passion. The delight of self-annihilation rings in the accents of his sensual "Faina". In the more virile verses of another section, "Enchantment through Fire", one feels a note of temporary acceptance of life. This is followed however by a still greater despondency and by a wish to forget himself

in psychic drugs. But a time came when even these would help no longer. He was compelled to look at the world with a sobered mind and with more than sobered eyes.

V

The prevalent mood of that phase (roughly from 1908 to 1917) can best be defined as spiteful apathy. The drabness and vulgarity of existence overpowered him to such an extent as to make all effort seem futile. The title of a typical record of those years, *The Loathsome World*, is in itself significant. In *Iambi* he tried to stir up his crushed faith in life. In the romantic drama, *The Rose and the Cross* (1912), his smouldering devotion to the Lady Fair flared up once more; and in the cycle *Carmen* he rekindled his former passion. Yet the fire that was now burning came too much out of the ashes. Everything seemed drab and empty. Forebodings of a great universal catastrophe—on an apocalyptic scale—began to hover over some of his poems like ominous shadows. But the deeper he penetrated into the pain and futility of life he saw around, the more intense he became as a poet. His language was now laconic, terse and realistic. Having abandoned the method of vague and abstract symbols, he made his very realism intensely symbolic. An approximate idea of this can perhaps be gathered from the *Danse Macabre*, paraphrased by R. M. Hewitt.

FROM WILDE TO PIRANDELLO

It's hard for a corpse in this world of men.
Better remain apart, alone;
You have to mix with them now and then
Or you'll never succeed in your career.
But oh! the fear that they might hear
 The rattle of bone on bone.

Live men still sleep when the dead man rises.
His thoughts are black as the day is long,
Plods to the office, bank, or assizes,
Where quills whisper a welcome-song.

Hour by hour must the dead man labour;
At last he's free, and puts on his coat,
Wags his haunches, grins at his neighbour
And feeds him a bawdy anecdote.

The rain has smeared with a nameless liquor
Houses and churches and humans grimy;
But the dead man drives where the mud is thicker,
Knowing a place that is still more slimy.

A gilded hall with mirrors about it.
Imbecile hostess and husband fool
Are glad to see him, who can doubt it?—
His evening suit was made by Poole.

Corpse, be brave now, raise thanksgiving:
They can't hear the rattle against that band;
No easy work to prove you are living,
But go round briskly, shake their hand.

ALEXANDER BLOK

Who is that by the distant column?
His eyes light up, for she too is dead.
Under their patter, with faces solemn,
Words that are real words are said.

"Weary friend, I am lost and strange here."
"Weary friend, I've nothing to tell."
"It's midnight now." "Oh, there's no danger—
Dance with my niece, she likes you well."

And over there with senses reeling,
Waiting, alert, her blood on fire,
The virgin stands, her eyes revealing
The ecstasy of life's desire.

With fluent malice more than human,
He murmurs into her ear alone,
Just as a live man woos a woman.
"How clever he is, how kind and dear!"
But somewhere near she can faintly hear
The rattle of bone on bone.

Another longer poem (or succession of poems), *The Life of My Friend*, is written in the same vein. In his beautiful *Garden of Nightingales* the disappointed dreamer emerged with all the magic of his art, whereas in several other verses his love of Russia came up again—with the old vehemence but a new accent. When everything had betrayed him; when he was tormented by forebodings about "the cold and gloom of days to come", his love for Russia

FROM WILDE TO PIRANDELLO

still remained. He knew her vices, her wickedness, her squalor; still he loved her with a love a typical utterance of which are the following lines (1914):

To sin, unashamed, to lose, unthinking,
The count of careless nights and days,
And then, while the head aches with drinking,
Steal to God's house, with eyes that glaze;

Thrice to bow down to earth, and seven
Times cross oneself beside the door,
With the hot brow, in hope of heaven,
Touching the spittle-covered floor;

With brass farthing's gift dismissing
The offering, the holy Name
To mutter with loose lips, in kissing
The ancient, kiss-worn icon-frame.

And coming home, then, to be tricking
Some wretch out of the same small coin,
And with an angry hiccup, kicking
A lean cur in his trembling groin.

And where the icon's flame is quaking
Drink tea, and reckon loss and gain,
From the fat chest of drawers taking
The coupons wet with spittle-stain;

And sunk in feather-bed to smother
In slumber, such as bears may know,—

ALEXANDER BLOK

Dearer to me than every other
Are you, Russia, even so.¹

VI

Blok's mixture of spite with despair—a mixture so frequent in his poems of those years—was but inverted idealism of an incurable dreamer. For his visions still pursued him, tormented him even in the quagmire of that existence which he was doomed to witness and to share. His negation was thus only the other side of his suppressed craving for a change radical enough to cleanse the earth and make it worthy of a new mankind.

More than once he prophesied the approach of a universal upheaval. And when the upheaval came in the shape of the Russian revolution, he greeted it with an enthusiasm full of sudden hopes and expectations. In joining the most radical revolutionary group—the bolsheviks—he was ready to give all his art to the “service of community” and to work for a regeneration of man and life. He saw a symbolic meaning even in the apocalyptic horror of those years. It was the irrational volcanic character of the events that seemed to justify some of his hopes to see at last a really new and better earth to live in. Far from being perturbed by it all, he identi-

¹ From *Russian Poetry*, translated by Babette Deutch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky (M. Lawrence).

fied it with that elemental "spirit of music" which—according to him—is at the bottom of all creative revolutions. That spirit he contrasted with the rationalist civilization of Western Europe for which he saw no perspective in the future. In his essay, *The Downfall of Humanism* (1919), he summed up such an attitude in a hasty but suggestive fashion.

"There are two kinds of time," he says, "one historical according to the calendar, and the other 'musical', without date or number. In the consciousness of the civilized man the first kind alone is immutably present; but it is only when we realize how near we are to Nature, only when we abandon ourselves to the wave of music issuing from the chorus of the Universe, that we live in the second. For life in days, months and years no balance of our powers is necessary. And this absence of necessity for effort soon reduces the majority of civilized people to the state of mere dwellers upon the earth. But balance becomes indispensable as soon as we live near the 'musical' reality of the world—near to Nature, to the elemental. For this we need above all to be well-ordered both in body and spirit, since it is only with the complete body and the complete spirit acting together that the 'music of the universe' can be heard. Loss of balance between the bodily and the spiritual inevitably makes us lose that music. It makes us lose the ability to escape from the time of the

calendar, that is, from historical days and years, into that other time which cannot be calculated.

"Epochs in which this balance is not destroyed may be called epochs of culture, in contrast to those when an integral perception of the world is beyond the bearers of an outlived culture, owing to the influx of melodies up to that time unfamiliar and unknown, which overcrowd the hearing. The influx may be slow if measured by the calendar, for new historical forces come into the consciousness of humanity gradually. Yet that which takes place slowly according to the laws of one kind of time can be completed suddenly according to the laws of the other. The movement of the one directing baton is enough to turn into a sudden hurricane the drawn-out melody of the orchestra. . . .

"The mistake of the inheritors of humanistic culture, the fatal contradiction into which they fell, originated in their exhaustion. The spirit of integrity, the 'spirit of music', abandoned them, and so they blindly put their trust in historical time. They failed to see that the world was already rising at a signal from a movement which was entirely new. While continuing to believe that the masses were acquiring freedom *within* the individualistic movement of civilization, they naturally could not see that those very masses were bearers of a different, of a new, spirit."

FROM WILDE TO PIRANDELLO

The old romantic in Blok thus came out, as strongly as ever, also in his attitude towards the revolution. Moreover, his new hopes stirred up his poetic genius as well. It was in January, 1918, that is, during the cruellest civil war and havoc, that he wrote his last two important poems, *The Twelve* and *Scythians*.

VII

The first of them is the high watermark of Blok's creative power. Owing to its wealth of rhythms, phrases and musical dissonances, it defies all attempts at an adequate translation, whether in verse or in prose. But even those who can read it in the original will miss a great deal if they don't look upon it as a synthetic expression of Blok's muse. Here he succeeds in blending practically all the ingredients of his poetry. His love of the "mad" irrational Russia with her wind-swept spaces, his revel in chaos, his wish to destroy for the sake of regeneration, his tedium and his ardent visions—they all combine in this realistic and yet symbolic rhapsody of his. The very opening reminds one of Blok's winds and blizzards:

Black night.
White snow.
The wind, the wind!
It will not let you go.

ALEXANDER BLOK

The wind, the wind!
Through God's whole world it blows.
The wind is weaving the white snow.
Brother ice peeps from below.
Stumbling and tumbling,
Folk slip and fall.
God pity all!

The wind is a whirl, the snow is a dance.
In the night twelve men advance.
Black, narrow rifle straps,
Cigarettes, tilted caps.¹

The narrative incident itself is crude and could have been taken from any police chronicle. One of the twelve bolshevist guards, who control Petrograd at night, shoots, in a fit of jealousy, his sweetheart Katya—a lewd street-girl “whose stockings are stuffed with Kerensky coins”. This motive is cunningly interwoven with the chaos of a bleak northern winter and with the orgy of revolution. The atmosphere is suggested by the very rhythm, tone and accent of each stanza. And as to Blok's own mood and temper, we can gather them from the way he derides the old “bourgeois” order:

A bourgeois, a lonely mourner,
His nose tucked in his ragged fur.

¹ Translated by Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky, in *Russian Poetry* (Martin Lawrence). A prose translation by C. B. Beechofer was published by Chatto & Windus.

FROM WILDE TO PIRANDELLO

Stands lost and idle in the corner,
Tagged by a cringing, mangy cur.
The bourgeois, like the hungry mongrel—
A silent question—stands and begs;
The old world, like a kinless mongrel,
Stands there, its tail between its legs.

Nothing that belongs to the old world matters.
Even the "holy Russia" of the good old days can
be blasphemed, trampled underfoot for the sake of
a new era, of a new world.

More daring, friends, take the lot!
At Holy Russia let's fire a shot!
At huttet Russia,
Fat rumped and solid.
Russia the stolid!
Ekh, ekh, unhallowed, unblessed.

The fury of destruction permeates the very air.
But it is destruction not for its own sake. Its meaning
is deeper. It is creative in its very essence, although
the perpetrators themselves may not be aware of it.
And so "the twelve" march. Through destruction,
crime and chaos they march on, until they find them-
selves in rather unexpected company:

Forward as a haughty host they tread.
A hungry mongrel shambles in the rear.
Bearing forth the banner's windy red,
Where the vagrant snow-veils veer,

ALEXANDER BLOK

In dim hands no bullets sear,
On the tempest gently thrown,
Like a snow of diamonds blown,
In mist-white roses garlanded—
Christ marches on. And the twelve are led.

VIII

This poem, which is now world famous, vibrates with revolutionary pathos. Still, it remains elusive enough to be interpreted in various ways, particularly its end. Christ at the head of the twelve bolshevist guards may look to some readers like a *deus ex machina*. The more so because nothing in the poem makes one expect such a denouement. On the other hand, he stands here as a Messianic symbol of the revolution itself; as a promise of new life purified through suffering, through the Inferno of blood, crime and starvation. It is said that Blok himself was not quite sure as to the real meaning of the poem and that he attentively listened to his critics who seemed to be anxious to "explain" it. One thing however is beyond doubt: *The Twelve* marks a final attempt on his part to conquer faith in humanity, in life. And this attempt he expressed with a verbal power which raised even the revolutionary street-jargon and the modern factory song into high poetry.

Less elusive and almost programmatic is his other

and weaker poem, *Scythians*. It is a platform counterpart to *The Twelve*. Blok challenges in it the lukewarm "bourgeois" West to join in the universal brotherhood inaugurated by Russia, or else—to tremble before a barbaric invasion to come. Conscientious of being one of the builders of a new world, he addresses the Western nations both as a Russian and a revolutionary:

Yes, you have long since ceased to love
As our cold blood can love; the taste
You have forgotten of a love
That burns like fire and like fire lays waste.

Yes, Russia is a Sphinx. Exulting, grieving,
And sweating blood, she cannot sate
Her eyes that gaze and gaze and gaze
At you with stone-lipped love for you, and hate.

This "stone-lipped love" and hatred in one with regard to the European West suggest the Messianic Slavophil Dostoevsky. Blok's Utopia, too, is permeated with frank Messianism. But in his case it is turned towards a future inaugurated by the revolution. So he shouts to the sceptical and reluctant Western Europe:

Come unto us, from the black ways of war,
Come to our peaceful arms and rest.
Comrades, while it is not too late,
Sheathe the sword. May brotherhood be blessed.

ALEXANDER BLOK

And in case the Western peoples should refuse to join, he threatens them with the "Asiatic face" of Russia, as well as with Russia's indifference to their future fate:

We will not move when the ferocious Hun
Despoils the corpse and leaves it bare,
Burns towns, herds cattle in the church
And smell of white flesh roasting fills the air.

IX

"Life is only worth while when we make immense demands upon it," Blok wrote in an essay at the time of his two revolutionary rhapsodies. "All or nothing! A faith, not in what is not found upon earth, but in what ought to be there, although at the present time it does not exist and may not come for quite a while."

Looking upon the Revolution with such an attitude, he saw its true scope in nothing less than "to lay hold of the whole world—a true revolution cannot desire anything less, though whether this aim will be accomplished or not we cannot guess. It cherishes the hope of raising a universal cyclone which will carry to lands buried in snow the warm wind and the fragrance of orange groves, and will water the sun-scorched plains of the south with the refreshing rain from the north. *Peace and the brotherhood of nations* is the banner under which the Russian

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revolution goes on its way. This is the theme of its roaring flood. This is the music which he who has ears to hear should hear."

Such was the idea which Alexander Blok, who was a typical intellectual, had of the great proletarian revolution. He was as uncompromising as the most ruthless Marxians, but he differed from them in that he was too impatient to see the economic and political upheaval completed by an adequate inner revolution in man himself.

It must have been the discrepancy between the external and the inner revolution—a discrepancy which assumed most unpalatable aspects during the ravages of the civil war, the famine and the Cheka—that eventually damped Blok's hopes and enthusiasm. The fact is that when he saw the actual trend of events, he soon became tired and passive. Disappointment closed upon him once more, and he remained practically silent during the last two years of his life. He died in 1921, at the age of forty.

Blok's death coincided with a complete dissolution of the Russian school of symbolism, of which he was the acknowledged leader.

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SEX AND EROS

(ON ROZANOV, WEININGER, AND D. H. LAWRENCE)

I

AMONG the pioneers of the erotic trek in recent European literature two writers can be mentioned who are so conspicuous as private "cases" that they cannot help arousing a general interest. One of them is the Russian thinker and publicist, Vassily Rozanov; and the other—the Jewish renegade Otto Weininger whose book, *Sex and Character* (as well as his subsequent suicide at the age of twenty-four), had caused a considerable stir at the beginning of the century.

What surprises one, at the very outset, in the work of Rozanov and Weininger is their all-absorbing scrutiny of the deeper aspects of sex. Both writers regard sex—whether rightly or wrongly—as the cardinal problem of man. Yet the final attitudes at which they arrive are irreconcilable. Their quest—a quest equally sincere in both and, with all that, leading to such a difference in conclusions—makes a comparison between the two seekers the more tempting and interesting. This interest is enhanced by the light the comparison itself can shed on certain dilemmas of modern consciousness in general. Moreover, in contrast to the cold and "clinical" explora-

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tions of sex on the part of Marcel Proust, the passionate metaphysical propensities of Rozanov and of Weininger make one think of D. H. Lawrence whose query can best be approached through these two men.

II

Rozanov, some of whose writings have already appeared in English, was a fragmentary, self-centred and self-contradictory individual, displaying a thousand masks, and also a peculiar capacity for mixing even sincere reverence with a cynical chuckle. Endowed with a rare psychological insight, he felt at ease only when rummaging in the most complicated shades of man's subconscious and half-conscious inner chaos. And the deeper he dived in its mazes, the more eager was he to dwell with gusto on what might be called (for lack of a better expression) psychic and spiritual underwear. He wallowed in it, examined it almost with a microscope, and at the same time delighted in unfolding it before his audience with a vocabulary full of winks, grimaces, suggestive stutters and smiles.

His very language has thus brought a unique *personal* accent into modern Russian literature. This accent is increased by the "naive" impudence with which he exhibits his own inner deformities. Never bothering about the distance between himself and his readers, he is usually anxious to catch his ideas on

the wing, and to present them while they still trepidate with the most intimate personal experience.

This may perhaps explain the apparent unconcern with which Rozanov tackles the riskiest themes during his excursions into the essence of sex, of morality, or of the voluptuous aspects of asceticism—exposed with great penetration in such works of his as *The Dark Image* and *The People of Moonlight*. The curious point however is that the farther he ventures in his analysis the less one feels that his daring is the result of inner courage. On the contrary, the final impression is that he goes to extreme limits owing to a kind of inertia on the part of his own prying inquisitiveness. Like Proust, he is a past master at peeping through the keyholes. And he is too weak to stop, to restrain himself, or even to wait until his own observations should settle and cool down. With Rozanov depth itself is due to the line of least resistance. So is his jerky soliloquizing bravado, his exhibitionism, and his continuous urge to “confess” in order to relieve the pressure of his own chaos.

An additional interest is attached to Rozanov by the fact that in many ways he is the Russian counterpart of D. H. Lawrence. The ideas about love and sex, made current in this country by Lawrence, had been expressed by Rozanov long before him—with the same emphasis, but often with a greater, serpent-like subtlety. For he, too, had found his “mission”

in preaching a renewal of life through Sex made innocent again and imbued with that mystery which would confer upon its functions a religious depth and significance. Like Lawrence, he hated asceticism as much as he hated the vulgar sexual licence. Finally, he made the same mistake as Lawrence with regard to the solution of the dilemma itself. That is why an analysis of Rozanov is bound to elucidate at least a few aspects of D. H. Lawrence as well.

III

There were two basic features in Rozanov the interaction of which can explain his attitude towards sex, and also towards Christianity. One of them was his much too little disciplined passion for the irrational; and the other, his much too warped love of life. As a profoundly irrational religion Christianity attracted him. It also appealed to his feminine passivity, to his yearning for inner warmth and for a metaphysical surrender. But Christianity as a religion which has driven joy out of life became repellent to him.

It was largely due to his interest in Christian asceticism that he reacted by embracing the opposite ideal of life. And in doing this he was confronted first of all by the problem of Sex in its physical, moral, spiritual and social significance. He became engrossed with this problem, even obsessed by it. As a result, he arrived at a kind of mystical pan-sexuality which

was very unlike that of Freud, and from which he expected a renewal of man and of life.

Yet in spite of his violent reaction against the ascetic ideals, Rozanov still remained a Christian by instincts—an “atavistic” trait which he shares with Nietzsche. But whereas Nietzsche increased the vigour of his anti-Christian utterances in proportion as he became aware of the spiritual temptations on the part of his own latent Christianity, Rozanov adopted a much more cowardly strategy. He attacked mainly from behind the ambush, and always kept ready an emergency exit—in case a retreat should be necessary. The way he combined his anti-Christian attitude towards “flesh” with a continuous reluctance to abandon Christianity was truly astonishing. On the other hand, had he been endowed with a stronger will and character, his field of psychological self-observation would have been much smaller, perhaps, than it was. For Rozanov developed his acuteness while exploiting his own weaknesses and inner contradictions, the “literary” advantages of which he realized, time and again, only too well. No wonder that he refused to abandon the comfortable maternal lap of the Russian Church even during the years of his most scathing attacks—attacks directed against the evils of asceticism, in the detection of which more than once he proved deeper than any of his contemporaries.

IV

The principal feature which Rozanov shares with Lawrence is his hatred of the Christian "spiritualization" of love for the sake of a bloodless and self-lacerating ascetic ideal. It was Christianity he incriminated with that gulf between the sex-less Love and the love-less Sex which is responsible for one of the most painful cleavages in man's nature. Rozanov hated this cleavage all the more because he himself was perhaps only too familiar with it. And not unlike Lawrence, he sought for an escape in that undifferentiated pre-Christian unity between Sex and Love which is typical of an earlier, fresher and more "savage" stage of human consciousness.

In his desire for such a unity (which he considered no less essential for the integration of life than Lawrence did) Rozanov, too, was attracted by various "primitives", particularly by those patriarchal races in whose healthy and spontaneous affirmation of sex he saw an eloquent contrast to Christian ideals. His pets in this respect were not Lawrence's Mexicans with their "dark gods", but the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, and the Old Testament Jews, on whose culture he threw some valuable gleams.

As for Jews, he was so fascinated by them that his fascination often turned into its own opposite: the Catullian hatred through love—*odi et amo*—so typical of a "womanly" nature. The more he admired them

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by instinct, the more he attacked them through his frequent and positively nauseating political anti-Semitism.

This duality which is not unlike his ambiguous attitude towards the Russian Church, stuck to him to the end of his life. He had an organic need, as it were, of such inner contrasts and paradoxes. And their very piquancy seemed to be one of his creative stimuli. After all, it was not for nothing that Rozanov was among the first modern admirers and commenters of Dostoevsky.¹ Yet what attracted him in the Jewish race was above all the feature he himself entirely lacked: the wholeness and wholesomeness of its sexual life. Brought up as a gloomy Christian, Rozanov could not help admiring the Old-Testamental pre-moral harmony and matter-of-factness in this respect. He admired them through envy, and envied through admiration. That was why after each of his anti-Semitic fits he usually hurried to praise Judaism, taken in its positive, life-affirming quintessence. And he paid the greatest compliment to it in his last work, *The Apocalypse of our Times*, written shortly before his death in 1919.

¹ Rozanov's first wife—his senior by some twenty years—was the one-time mistress of Dostoevsky, Mlle. Suslova. Paulina in Dostoevsky's "Gambler" is supposed to be her portrait.

In contrast to Rozanov's yearning for sexual wholeness, Otto Weininger represents and also advocates the greatest *conscious* cleavage between Sex and Love; between what he calls the sensuous "lower" life on the one hand, and the life of Spirit on the other. His point of departure thus becomes extremely Christian. No Christian could go further in his dualism than Weininger goes, when affirming that "the lower life is merely a projection of the higher on the world of the senses, a reflection of it in the sphere of necessity, as a degradation of it, or its Fall. And the great problem is how the eternal, lofty idea came to be bound with earth. This problem is the guilt of the world. . . . It is the riddle of the universe and of life; the bonding of the unlimited in the bonds of space, of the eternal in time, of the spirit with matter. It is the relation of freedom to necessity, of something to nothing, of God to the devil. The dualism of the world is beyond comprehension; it is the plot of the story of man's Fall, the primitive riddle. It is the binding of eternal life in a perishable being, of the innocent in the guilty,"¹

It was out of such an attitude towards the world that arose Weininger's Manichaeian valuation of life, and of love. In love, more than anywhere else, he

¹ This and other quotations are from the English edition of *Sex and Character*. (Heinemann.)

saw a manifestation of cosmic dualism, expressed in the antinomy between Sex as such and what he calls Eros. While identifying Eros with the idea of the de-sexualized Christian-Platonic *caritas*, he insists—often with an almost hysterical vehemence—that the awakening of Eros as something different from (and utterly opposed to) Sex, is one of the inevitable and most important stages of man's inner development. He never tires of pointing out that Eros and Sex, or love and desire, are “two unlike, mutually exclusive, opposing conditions, and during the time a man really loves, the thought of physical union with the object of his love is insupportable. The more erotic a man is the less he will be troubled with his sexuality, and vice versa. . . . That person lies, or has never known what love is, who says he loves a woman whom he desires. . . . Then there is the ‘Platonic love’, which the professors of psychology have such a poor opinion of. I should say rather, there is only ‘Platonic love’, because any other so-called love belongs to the kingdom of the senses: it is the love of Beatrice, the worship of Madonna. The Babylonian woman is the idol of sexual desire.”

It was the feature which Rozanov admired in the Jews—the spontaneous undifferentiated sexual life on the “biological” plane, as well as the glow of physical contact (so dear to Lawrence)—that Weininger detested as “low” and unworthy of human

beings. Although a Jew by birth, he therefore rejected the "sensual" Judaism and embraced Christianity, in whose sexless Madonna worship he thought he had discovered the highest expression of Eros.

What is important in Weininger's case is not so much the question whether his solution is right or wrong, but the fact that he refused to look backwards, or to "solve" the conflict by seeking for shelters in a wholeness which is in essence more primitive than the conflict itself. He must have realized that the call of the wild to the sexual state which existed before the cleavage is as futile as Rousseau's naive return to Nature with which it is analogous in more than one respect.

The truth is that no "return" of the sort can ever succeed. In trying to eliminate the gulf between Love and Sex by forcing ourselves into a past stage of consciousness, we do not come to real harmony or integration, but only to that rather messy *mixture* of the two planes, the mixture of biology and metaphysics, which is well known to the readers of Rozanov, and also to those of D. H. Lawrence.

VI

Otto Weininger was the man in whom the differentiation between Sex and Love must have reached a tension verging on madness. Such at least is the impression left by his *Sex and Character*, by his

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Diaries, and by some of those interesting fragments and essays of his which were published, after his death, under the title *On Ultimate Things* (Ueber die letzten Dinge).

In Central Europe there exists an entire literature about Weininger. Still, the sensation once caused by his work was out of proportion with its actual merit. Not a few pages of his unpleasant *opus magnum* are now out of date. The book remains however a valuable personal document whose very aberrations can throw much light upon the mentioned inner conflict.

The acuteness of that conflict was responsible not only for Weininger's rancorous tone, but also for his biased attitude towards women and the Jews, both of whom he considered representative of the "sexual" principle devoid of Eros. What else could he do but denounce them—for metaphysical and moral reasons! And the vehemence of his attacks was all the stronger the more he was aware of the sensuous "Jew" and the "Woman" within himself.

That is why his notorious *Sex and Character* represents one of the most anti-feminist and at the same time anti-Jewish documents in European literature. But in essence it is a disguised self-attack. It is also a frantic attempt on the part of a spiritually expatriated Semite to take root in the values of a religious mentality which still may seem somewhat alien to his race.

It certainly is amusing to see how Weininger denounces that very sympathy and spontaneous warmth in human intercourse which was so much praised, as well as aimed at, by Rozanov and Lawrence. He was the last person to be impressed by the expansive gregarious propensities of the Jews, and by their "pairing instinct" (as he calls it). Instead of seeing in either of these two tendencies a virtue, he denounced them as vices, typical of both Jews and women. According to him, "like women, Jews tend to adhere together, but they do not associate as free independent individuals mutually respecting each other's individuality. . . . The pairing instinct is the great remover of limits between individuals; and the Jew, *par excellence*, is the breaker down of such limits. He is the opposite pole from aristocrats, with whom the preservation of the limits between individuals is the leading idea. The Jew is an inborn communist. The Jew's careless manners in society and his want of social tact turn on this quality, for the reserves of social intercourse are simply barriers to individuals."

To make his generalizations even more sweeping, he asserts that women and Jews are not individualities enough to know all the inner contradictions of the "Aryan" man. And so, "greatness is absent from the nature of the woman and the Jew, the greatness of morality, the greatness of evil. In the Aryan man the good and bad principles of Kant's religious philosophy

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are ever present, ever in strife. In the Jew and the woman, good and evil (i.e., Eros and Sex) are not distinct from one another."¹

VII

Unlike Lawrence and Rozanov, Otto Weininger saw in Sex as such the primeval dark power by means of which Nature opposes the process of individualization and tries to reduce all separate selves to a pre-moral and pre-individual "Dionysian" welter. Absolute Sex he therefore identified with the absolute negation of both morality and individuality.

A return to the undifferentiated sexual "monism" *à la* Rozanov was therefore considered by him a regression, a fall, even a spiritual suicide, which he would never contemplate. Unwilling to go "back to Sex", and yet unable to overcome the cleavage by a higher balance or synthesis, he saw one solution only: a ruthless suppression of Sex in the name of Eros. Hence the Puritanic fury with which he attacked anything that reminded him of Sex. But like all Puritans, he denounced in everybody the very thing from which he himself suffered and of which he was all the time afraid.

¹ The nonsensical and utterly dilettantish "Aryan" twaddle in Hitlerite Germany is due, not only to *Gobineau* (via Houston Chamberlain, faked Nietzsche, and Spengler), but partly also to the pathologic and purely personal outbursts of the Jew, Otto Weininger.

Failing to overcome the antithesis of his own dilemma, Otto Weininger thus could not help thinking mainly in antitheses. Eros and Sex, Man and Woman, Mother and Prostitute, "Aryans" and Jews—these are some of his dogmatic contrasts. Barricaded behind his moral principles, he refused any compromise, any *pourparlers*, with the fiend within himself. He rejected wholesale the healthy "non-moral" (as distinct from immoral) sexuality of the same Old Testament which was so much relished by his Russian antipodes, Rozanov. The only salvation he saw was in an unswerving submission to the ascetic ideals of Plato, of the Gospels, and of Kant's "Categorical Imperative".

In his frantic attempts to suppress Sex at any price, Weininger would not even think of Eros as a creative sublimation of Sex—a sublimation which turns our "libido" into an æsthetic and spiritual experience. He refused to see that in true Eros the division between physical and spiritual disappears not because one of them has been suppressed for the sake of the other, but simply because the cleavage itself has been balanced and left behind. This new unity is however poles apart from that pre-moral wholeness in which the cleavage has not yet even begun to take place. Eros certainly does transcend Sex as such, but for this very reason it also includes and ennobles it. Whenever it fails to do so, Sex has the tendency to turn against

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Eros, to grow at its expense, and therefore at the expense of the individual.

VIII

Weininger's tragedy was due not so much to the acuteness of his inner conflict as to his own inability to transcend it. In essence he was an over-sexed individual who hated sex because he was only too well aware of his helplessness before it. And so he summoned all his hatred, his "philosophy", his Kant and his logic (often based on false premises) to stay off the enemy. In his moral self-defence he went so far as to turn, eventually, against love of any kind—even against the "higher" Platonic love. In order to discard his own obsession or obsessions, he compared all love with murder. These are some of his conclusions:

"Since Novalis first called attention to it, many have insisted on the association between sexual desire and cruelty. All that is born of woman must die. Reproduction, birth and death are indissolubly associated; the thought of untimely death awakens sexual desire in its fiercest form, as the determination to reproduce oneself. And so sexual union, considered ethically, psychologically, and biologically, is allied to murder. . . . Ordinary sexuality regards the woman only as a means of gratifying passion or of begetting children. The higher eroticism, however, is merciless

to the woman because it requires her to be the vehicle of a projected personality, or the mother of psychic children.¹ Such love is not only anti-logical, as it denies the objective truth of the woman and requires an illusory image of her, but it is anti-ethical with regard to her. . . . Madonna worship itself is fundamentally immoral, inasmuch as it is a shutting of the eyes to truth. The Madonna worship of the great artist is a destruction of woman, and is possible only by a complete neglect of the women as they exist in experience; a replacement of actuality by a symbol; a re-creation of woman to serve the purpose of man, and a murder of woman as she exists."

It would be impossible to imagine a greater contrast to the views of Lawrence or of Rozanov, and yet the dilemma with which they both were trying to cope was the dilemma of Weininger. The contrast becomes more than evident when one compares their religious exaltation of sex with such passages of Weininger as these: "The rejection of sexuality is merely the death of the physical life, to put in its place the full development of the spiritual life. . . . The only true goal is divinity and the union of humanity with Godhead; that is the real choice between good and evil, between existence and negation."

Thus the Jew, Otto Weininger, surpasses even the most ardent Christian fanatics of asceticism. In his

¹ He means Dante's love in *Vita Nuova* and *Divine Comedy*. J.L.

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final conclusion he not only agrees with aged Tolstoy and his *Kreutzer Sonata*, but becomes even more radical and more stern than the sage of Yasnaya Polyana. We know, however, that at the bottom of Tolstoy's Puritanism there was a fight against his half-suppressed lust. A similar fight, and hardly less intense than in Tolstoy, was the secret of Weininger also. But instead of Tolstoy's biological horror of death, Weininger was haunted by a metaphysical horror comparable to that of August Strindberg (during his last phase) or, recently, of Franz Kafka, the author of *The Castle*.

IX

Only an inveterate sensualist, grimly struggling against his own latent sensuality, could have written such an ultra-Puritanic book as *Sex and Character*. In this respect Otto Weininger could almost be defined as D. H. Lawrence from the other end. For D. H. Lawrence suffered from the opposite fault: from too much Puritanism, inherited and innate Puritanism, which he was anxious to eliminate by a forced affirmation of senses and of Sex.¹ But like Lawrence who remained, with all his anti-Puritanism, a dis-

¹ This tendency was tinged and complicated in him by his strong "mother-complex", and probably also by a hidden fear of losing (through consumption or some physical defect) his virility. His vehemence, reminiscent at times of a "hot-gospeller", is not a proof of real strength, but only of a yearning for it.

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guised self-righteous Puritan to the end of his days, Weininger remained a disguised voluptuary.

It is even possible that Weininger's suppressed sensuality was of a perverted kind—a thing of which Rozanov more than suspected him when writing in *Fallen Leaves* (Wishart): "From every page of Weininger's there is heard the shout 'I love men'. 'Well, you're a sodomite then', and with that you may close the book. . . . He speaks of *all women* as if they were his rivals, just with the same irritation. . . . His jealousy of women (for men) made him hate 'women-rivals'. And along with this he is full of the most profound moral nostalgia; and thereby revealed the moral nature of women, which he in his jealousy denies."

If Rozanov be right (and there are factors supporting his suspicion), then Weininger's tragedy becomes all the more confused and poignant. His eventual suicide may even have been prompted to him by *moral* reasons—by the fear he would not be strong enough to resist the perverted temptations of "flesh" which threatened to hurl him down from his ascetic pinnacles.

Facing the choice between the physical and the spiritual death (or what he considered as such), he preferred the former. He sacrificed his life to his intense moral will. In this way his end is so different from that of Rozanov. For even in his death Rozanov

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took the line of least resistance. Peacefully reconciled, he died in the warm lap of that very Church whose ascetic spirit he had been fighting for years.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

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I

It is enough to compare Rilke's poetry with the work of such representatives of German modernism as Detlev von Liliencron, Richard Dehmel, Stefan George, or even his Austrian colleague, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in order to notice that essentially feminine quality of his which made his very strength (similar to Chopin's strength) grow out of his weakness. All his sensitiveness, his emotional and spiritual exaltation, seem to have developed largely at the expense of his will and vitality. Besides, coming from an old aristocratic stock, he was bound to inherit from his ancestors, not only their refinement, but also their physical exhaustion, as well as a certain helplessness in the "practical" modern life. In addition he was a product of Austrian culture; of that peculiar Austrian Baroque which is full of contemplative quietism and of "autumnal" moods—such as one finds in Grillparzer's works, and in those of Hofmannsthal, of Schnitzler.

Being too much in the past by his blood, and too much in the future by his mind, Rilke could not help feeling—like the "Last ones" of his early sketches—entirely out of place in the present-day world. Hence

his inability to settle down. This restlessness he combined with a melancholy shyness, a fastidious fear of life, and a rather Slavonic passivity.

Rilke is curiously Slavonic, not only by his nature and by the extreme melodiousness of his poems, but also by his instinctive leanings, his "selective affinities". Born (1875) and bred in Prague, he was greatly attached to that city. He professed, in his two youthful "Prague Stories", his sympathy with the Czechs and their language. One of his early poems is an enthusiastic tribute to the famous Czech bard, Jaroslav Vrchlicky. He seems to have been familiar also with the work of the "pre-Raphaelite" Czech eclectic, Julius Zeyer, with whom he shares his contemplative dreaminess, his broad cosmopolitanism, and also his roaming propensities. Whether he knew the poems of Otokar Brezina (his Czech peer and one of the greatest mystics in modern poetry) is a matter of conjecture. Much more important for his inner growth was, however, his subsequent contact with another Slav country: with Russia.

Rilke himself acknowledged that his stay in Russia (1899 and 1900), where he enjoyed among other things the personal acquaintance of Tolstoy, had been the most decisive event in his life. His matchless *Stunden-Buch* (The Book of Hours) was inspired mainly by the atmosphere of the "holy Russia" of those days. So was *Die Geschichten von lieben Gott*

(Stories of God). There existed, at that time, quite a number of Russias—good and bad. But Rilke was fortunate enough to discover at the outset the one which appealed to him personally and responded to his own needs.

The patriarchal-religious and childlike strain in the people he had discovered in pre-war Russia made an indelible impression upon him. And this was to be expected, since both features were typical of his own character. He himself was religious, and at the same time remained in essence a child to the end of his days. Or to state a complicated thought in rather simple terms: he grew up and matured mainly *on the plane* of the child. Hence his almost unconscious depth, and his clairvoyant insight into the secrets of life and man—an insight full of spontaneous wisdom and utterly devoid of "cleverness". In addition he possessed a sensibility which made him one of the greatest artists in modern European poetry. Yet the poet grew in him only together with the man. That is why his work shows, apart from technical progress, also the steady inner progress of an individual who is striving—through art—for his highest self-realization, and who finds in this very goal his main creative stimulus. The word poetry meant to him neither technical juggling nor emotional debauch, but that crystallized inner experience in which the "idea", rhythm, and melody become one organic

whole. "One should wait and collect sense and sweetness during a whole lifetime and if possible a long one, and then, right at the end, one might perhaps be able to write ten lines that were good. For verses are not, as people suppose, feelings (one has those soon enough)—they are experiences." It was his experiences that Rilke turned into poems in such a magic way as to imbue even the most ordinary words with a new *souffle* and flavour.

II

Rilke's first poems, *Leben und Lieder* (Life and Songs, 1894) can be left aside as too derivative, Heinesque, and sentimental. Even his subsequent three collections, *Larenopfer* (Offerings to Lares, 1896), *Traumgekrönt* (Dreamcrowned, 1897) and *Advent* (1898), are much indebted to the general "decadent" trend of the nineties. Subjective and impressionist, they show more rhythmic and verbal suppleness, more fineness of touch than actual originality. But whereas the *Larenopfer* deals with his native soil and city, he turns in *Traumgekrönt* and in *Advent* within himself only, and sings like a shy stranger in this world:

Ich will wie ein Kind im Krankenzimmer
einsam, mit heimlichem Lachen, leise
leise—Tage und Träume bauen. ¹

¹ Like a child in the sickroom, lonely, with a secret laugh, will I softly, softly—build my days and dreams.

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Abandoning himself to loneliness, to his moody reveries, emotions and impressions, he found an adequate poetic rendering for their most elusive nuances. Yet, however much preoccupied with his own personal inner world, he not only preserved but even increased his longing for expansion, for a warm sympathy with people and with things, as though aware that cutting himself from them would mean to cut himself from life. At the same time, he was unable to accept life as he saw it. Hence his poetic transvaluations of actuality. Again and again he returned to the world, but only in order to re-create it through his vision and his longing; to imbue it with a new significance—until art became for him, step by step, a path towards a transfiguration (and, through it, also a conquest) of all life. Already in the *Advent* he sings:

Das ist mein Streit:
Sehnsuchtgeweiht
Durch alle Tage schweifen.
Dann, stark und breit,
mit tausend Wurzelstreifen
tief in das Leben greifen—
und durch das Leid
weit aus dem Leben reifen,
weit aus der Zeit.¹

¹ That is my strife: consecrated by longing, to roam through all days. Then to reach, strong and broad, with a thousand roots, deep down into life—and to ripen through pain, beyond life, and far beyond time.

It was in his next two books, *Mir zur Feier* (To my Glory,¹ 1899) and in *Das Buch der Bilder* (The Book of Images), that Rilke endeavoured to expand not only beyond actuality, but also in it; to weld, or at least to balance the real with the supra-real, the personal with the universal, the temporal with the timeless, and so to make all his daily hours a "soft dialogue with eternity". He mixed lyrical and semi-epic themes with philosophic meditations, with religious motives and also with impressionist descriptions, probably stimulated by the influence of the Worpswede group of painters; for he lived at that time in the flat land near Worpswede, knew its painters colony personally, and even wrote a monograph on them (much more complimentary than they actually deserved). The broad flatness of the surrounding country became his favourite landscape. He saw in it a symbol of that psychic expanse, or expansion, of which he sang:

Und dann meine Seele, sei weit, sei weit,
Dass dir das Leben gelinge,
breite dich wie ein Feierkleid
über die sinnenden Dinge.²

The desire of such expansion fostered his poetic clairvoyance, his pantheism, his notion of a primary

¹ Later enlarged under the title, *Frühe Gedichte* (Early Poems).

² And then, my soul, be spacious and wide, that you might achieve your life, spread out like a festive robe over all concrete things.

wholeness of life. It made him grow out and beyond himself—beyond his former subjectivity. Even his erotics of that period are curiously over-personal and saturated with that *caritas* the passion of which has transcended sensuous love rather than run away from it. He wrote a number of poems about girls and women exclusively in that spirit, without becoming cheap or old-maidish. The rapid growth of his inner experience and of his intense vision is best shown, however, in his *Stunden-Buch* (The Book of Hours) which is one of the best works in modern German poetry.

III

This book was written between 1899 and 1903, but it appeared only in 1905 (the first two parts) and in 1906, i.e. after his *Book of Images*. The whole of it was a poetic fruit of Rilke's visit to Russia, undertaken in the company of Frau Lou Andreas-Salomé (with whom Nietzsche had once been—rather unfortunately—in love). Rilke was impressed mainly by the Russia of pilgrims, monks and seekers. At his very first contact with it, in the atmosphere of the indescribable Easter days in old Moscow, he felt he had discovered what he had been longing for: his spiritual home-country. The passive feminine character of Russian mysticism must have appealed to him as did the patient naive faith of those primitive

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masses he happened to come across. He lived himself into that atmosphere with a sympathy and an intensity the glow of which is felt in the pages of his *Book of Hours*.

What strikes one in the latter is above all its blending of art and religion, or at least of art and religiosity. This was, in Rilke's case, both pantheistic and child-like. It was his awareness of the primary totality of all life (symbolized in God the Father) that prompted to him his first attitude. At the same time, his feeling of being a lonely stranger in this world was in itself analogous to that of a child who clings the more to his parent the more he feels oppressed by his own loneliness. His surrender to God was like the surrender of an orphan to his cosmic father for whom he had been longing since the beginning of time, without being able ever to grasp either Him or himself:

Ich kreise um Gott, um den uralten Turm,
und kreise jahrtausendlang;
und weiss noch nicht: bin ich ein Falke, ein Sturm,
oder ein grosser Gesang.¹

It was partly his pantheistic nearness to God that prevented the poet from getting hold of Him. God evaded him like a Proteus, or else dissolved in

¹ I circle round God, round the ageless Tower, and I have been circling for thousands of years; and I don't know yet: am I a falcon, a storm, or a great melody.

that universal life which includes all the variety, all contrasts and contradictions of existence. Rilke's yearning for oneness with Him was thus accompanied by a passionate quest of God, even by a struggle with God for the sake of his own self-realization. For to grow meant, in his opinion, to become conquered by Him—conquered by higher and higher values (*der tiefbesiegte von immer Grösserem zu sein*). He knew that his own consciousness perfected God Himself, in perfecting itself through God—since God, too, is in the process of becoming; and in so far as He grows in and through man's consciousness, He is not only man's Creator or Father, but also his creation, his "Son".

Du siehst, dass ich ein Sucher bin.
 Einer, der hinter seinen Händen
 Verborgен geht und wie ein Hirt;
 einer, der träumt dich zu vollenden
 und: dass er sich vollenden wird.¹

At times one wonders whether Rilke is not as much a maker (in the sense of projecting his own subjective *Weltgefühl*) as a seeker of God. And in submitting to Him, he often asserts himself against Him—through his very surrender. On the one hand, he realizes that he and mankind do not live, but are only "lived by

¹ Thou seest that I am a seeker. One who walks hidden behind his own hands, and like a shepherd: one who dreams of fulfilling himself through fulfilling Thee.

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God"; and on the other, he still challenges Him almost in the manner of that other poet-mystic, Angelus Silesius:

Was wirst du tun, Gott, wenn ich sterbe?
Ich bin dein Krug (wenn ich zerscherbe?)
Ich bin dein Trank (wenn ich verderbe?)
Bin dein Gewand und dein Gewerbe,
Mit mir verlierst du deinen Sinn.¹

And again:

Ich aber will dich begreifen,
wie dich die Erde befreift;
mit meinem Reifen
reift
dein Reich.²

The ecstasy of religious self-obliteration on the one hand, and that of religious self-realization on the other, thus meet in one powerful flame, in which poetry and prayer become one. Aware of the immanent presence of God, the poet feels the whole of life as a miracle and a mystery. And his own pain, his "earthly little hell", does not matter so long as God's will rushes through the Cosmos like a mighty wave in which "day after day is drowned".

All these utterances he puts into the mouth of a

¹What wilt Thou do, God, if I perish? I—Thy vessel (if I get broken?) I—Thy drink (if I get spoiled?) I am Thy garment and Thy work, and but for me Thou wouldst lose Thy meaning.

² I, however, want to grasp Thee as the Earth does; with my own ripening ripens Thy kingdom.

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God-seeking Russian monk. The atmosphere of "holy Russia" is particularly strong in the second part: "The Book of Pilgrimage." Even the occasional landscape motives are reminiscent of the wide plains of Russia. And the poet, who has discovered his kinship with the restless "God-seekers" wandering in those plains, becomes himself a patient pilgrim on the way to timeless values. In the third part again, *The Book of Poverty and Death*, written under the influence of his Parisian impressions, he turns against that parody of life which he finds in the grime and misery of our great cities. Not only true individual life becomes impossible in them, but even death itself—with its inscrutable secret—is degraded to a vulgar *cliché*. In his praise of voluntary poverty, which sacrifices the values of the moment to those of eternity, Rilke joins the ideal of St. Francis to whom the concluding verses are dedicated.

IX

Both the poetic and the spiritual pathos are sustained on the highest level in the *Book of Hours*, which reflects Rilke's own life and strife, at least up to that period. But the very height of his inner experience made a temporary descent almost inevitable. Rilke's descent in his next two volumes of *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems, 1907-8) was, however, only apparent. It was a continuation and a deepening

of that path which he had struck already in his *Book of Images*. The visionary and the seer were again joined by the observer, who wanted to be not only "beyond" things, but also among them: as their free master and re-creator. Rilke's mystical temper now collaborated with Rilke's artistic will and genius, directed towards the objective outward things, not only to describe them or to use them as mere symbols, but in order to penetrate through visible externals to their invisible essence. And again we notice a strong stimulus behind it. This time it was Rodin, whom he had met already in 1903.¹

Rilke found in Rodin (whose works he also overpraised) a friend and a spiritual complement, as we can gather from his monograph on the *maître*, and even more from his *New Poems*, the second volume of which is dedicated to Rodin. In contrast to Rilke, Rodin was all of this world. It was his rich and robust personality that Rilke particularly admired.

So he now tried to develop in himself to the uttermost certain qualities he found in Rodin: above all his patient observation, his power of concentration, his love of living forms and of concrete details. Even Rilke's eroticism became more earthly, more passionate. And as to his eye, it soon began to show

¹ In 1905 and 1906 he was Rodin's secretary (for a few months only).

an incredible acuteness. Men and women, cities, landscapes, animals, plants and stones—they all were now minutely described from without, in order to strengthen his intuitive vision from within. His symbolist and his plastic methods combined were thus responsible for a series of truly great poems in which the two visions merge and complete each other. He also re-created in this vein several classic and biblical motives—narrative descriptions evoking the various states of mind. His “Pietà” (dealing with Magdalene’s love of Christ) is an example. So is his “Garden of Olives”—a condensed symbol of man’s loneliness on earth.

Rilke’s former intoxication with God is absent in the *New Poems*. His concreteness often looks as if he were trying to balance by it his excessive spiritual *élan*. Yet in his subsequent *Requiem* (1909) and his much too “pre-Raphaelite” *Marienleben* (Life of the Holy Virgin, 1912) the old Rilke reappeared. The same can be said, to some extent, of his impressionist prose work, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (The Notebook of M. L. B.).

This book is, perhaps, the best introduction into Rilke the man. As a disguised autobiography, it is an interesting prose *pendant* to his entire work before *New Poems*. His impressionism (reminiscent of J. P. Jakobsen’s *Niels Lyhne*), his lyrical, psychological and narrative power, join here in order to reveal the

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mentality of a decadent *déraciné*, who is haunted by his over-sensitive nerves, his poverty, by the squalid misery of the old Parisian quarters, and most of all by his own fear of life. His personal fate is here depicted on the background of our disintegrating civilization. The nightmare of a depersonalizing big city looms forward in every chapter. And Rilke is overawed by its atmosphere in which neither a personal life nor even a personal death is possible. "The desire to have a death of one's own is growing rarer and rarer. In a little while it will be rarer than a life of one's own. . . ."

The *Notebook* thus becomes a mosaic of moods and impressions, meditations, portraits, reminiscences of childhood—sprinkled now and then with "supra-normal" experiences. The concluding pages with the strange pendant to André Gide's version of the Prodigal Son are particularly interesting, for they throw a light on Rilke's own attitude towards love.

The book was started as early as 1904, but Rilke completed it only in 1910. The letters he wrote during that period to his wife and to his friends are very illuminating with regard to its genesis. Yet with all its virtues the book remains somewhat rambling: the author wanted to put too many things into it. And one of the chief reasons why he wrote it probably was his wish to sublimate his own fear of life by analysing it away. The shy "stranger in this world",

so conspicuous in Rilke's early poems, actually did conquer his fear of life. The stages of this conquest are marked by his *Book of Images*, *Malte Laurids Brigge*, *New Poems*, and most of all by his last and ripest creations, *Sonette an Orpheus* (Sonnets to Orpheus, 1922) and *Duineser Elegien* (Duino Elegies, begun in 1912, but finished in 1922).¹

V

Both collections appeared after a ten years' silence on the part of Rilke—including the years during which Europe had to pass through the greatest self-inflicted travails and trials. Yet the poet emerged out of that chaos unimpaired and in some respects even riper, as we can gather from the two mentioned works which belong to "difficult" poetry: difficult owing not only to Rilke's technique, but also to his condensed and often too abstract symbolism, reminding one of Paul Valéry, who was amongst Rilke's favourite French authors. His restless quest of God on the one hand, and his former fear of the world on the other, seem to have given way to a more or less serene acceptance of life, which he now affirms even through his cult of death. The motif of the third part of his *Book of Hours* is thus resumed and further developed. Instead of reducing life to death,

¹ An English translation of *Duino Elegies*, and of a number of other works by Rilke, has been published by the Hogarth Press.

he regards death as a new revelation and a new metamorphosis of life itself. Contemplating all existence *sub specie aeterni*, he sees in it a flux of continuous mutations; a flux from the actual to the supra-real, from the visible to the "invisible", up to that final transformation of things which will obliterate eventually the hostility between spirit and matter.

Death as a path towards such a metamorphosis thus becomes—in his opinion—the greatest event, and at the same time the greatest mystery on earth. For in essence there is no death—unless we understand by it that mechanical existence which rejects change and growth. As Rilke puts it elsewhere: "Death is when a man lives and does not know he lives; death is when he cannot die at all." Hence:

Wolle die Wandlung. C sei fur die Flamme begeistert,
drin sich ein Ding dir entzieht, das mit
Verwandlungen prunkt. ¹

The meaning of life consists in a transfiguration through such a flame. The final end of the material world is to become "invisible", i.e. transfigured on the highest plane of man's consciousness. And for the sake of such an aim we must accept, we must love our earth and our life with all the reverence of which we are capable.

¹ Crave for the change! O, to be inspired for that flame into which vanish all things that glitter with change.

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Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: unsichtbar
in uns erstehn?—Ist es dein Traum nicht,
einmal unsichtbar zu sein? Erde! Unsichtbar!
Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender
Auftrag?

Erde, du liebe, ich will.¹

The contemplative quietist and “decadent” Rilke thus conquered at last that balance which comes out of one’s inner tension and one’s active will to span a bridge between the greatest personal differentiation on the one hand, and the supra-personal wholeness on the other. His inner peace was now due not to a passive resignation, but to a new synthesis between his own ego and the world.

It was here that Rilke reached the limit of the neo-romantic movement and made at the same time a brave attempt to overcome its contradictions, in the name of a new acceptance of life. At this stage Rilke’s thought, too, became more “Sybilline” (to use the expression Edmond Jaloux applies to him) than ever. And more than ever he tried to make art a path towards the highest peaks of consciousness and life.²

¹ Earth, is it not this that thou wilt: to be reborn in us invisible? —Is it not thy dream to become some time invisible? Earth! Invisible! What, if not change can be thy pressing task? Earth, thou my beloved one, I desire thee.

² The two slender collections of poems he wrote in French, at that period, are reminiscent of his early German work.

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Always avoiding publicity and self-advertisement, he spent the last years of his life in seclusion. He may have neglected fame, but fame did not neglect him. At the time of his death (in December, 1926) he was known, and deservedly known, all over Europe as one of the profoundest contemporary poets.

THE FUTURIST INTERLUDE

THE FUTURIST INTERLUDE

I

WHAT one still remembers of the hey-day of futurism (between 1910 and 1915) is mainly a series of scandals connected with futurist gatherings, exhibitions and publications. At present it would be rather difficult to point out a single futurist book or even painting (in spite of such names as Severini and Boccioni) of real significance. Yet the movement itself was significant enough. With all its warlike dilettantism mistaken for novelty, and its impudence mistaken for courage, it proved a useful and even a necessary ferment which exercised a definite influence upon the recent development of art and literature. It helped to modify the technique of the verse (particularly of the *vers libre*); it left its traces in certain aspects of modern prose (disruption of the syntax), painting, sculpture, and even in modern architecture—since Le Corbusier and other similar innovators had been anticipated by the talented futurist Sant' Elia who was killed on the Italian front in 1916.

All things considered, futurism as an independent movement may now be defunct; but a number of post-war currents bore, and partly still bear, its stamp, not to mention the new lease of life it received in the

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poetry of revolutionary Russia. Far from being the casual outcome of a clique, it concealed behind its extravagances a number of features which were typical of the *Zeitgeist* and which anticipated quite a few disturbing phenomena. For the root of futurism is to be sought beyond, or at least apart from, mere art. It was not so much an æsthetic as a spiritual and social manifestation. And as such it certainly deserves a retrospective scrutiny—a proceeding which can be of value only in so far as it throws some light upon larger and more important issues of the present-day inner crisis.

II

The safest approach, in this case, is to let futurism speak for itself. Even those readers who are not familiar with the books of its founder Marinetti, can gather all its tenets from the "Initial Manifesto" attached to the catalogue of the Italian futurist paintings, exhibited in the Sackville Gallery in 1912. Here are some of them, signed by Marinetti himself.

"The essential elements of our poetry shall be courage, daring and rebellion.

"Literature has hitherto glorified thoughtful immobility, ecstasy and sleep; we shall extol aggressive movement, feverish insomnia, the double quick step, the somersault, the box on the ear, the fisticuff.

"We declare that the world's splendour has been

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enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing motor car, its frame adorned with great pipes, like snakes with explosive breath . . . a roaring motor car, which looks as though running on shrapnel, is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.

"We wish to glorify War—the only health giver of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the Anarchist, the beautiful ideas that kill, the contempt for woman.

"We wish to destroy the museums, the libraries; we fight against moralism, feminism and all opportunistic and utilitarian meannesses.

"We shall sing the great crowds in the excitement of labour, pleasure of rebellion; of the multi-coloured and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capital cities; of the nocturnal vibration of arsenals and workshops beneath their violent electric moons; of the greedy stations swallowing smoking snakes; of factories suspended from the clouds by their strings of smoke; of bridges leaping like gymnasts over the diabolical cutlery of sunbathed rivers; of adventurous liners scenting the horizon; of broad-chested locomotives prancing on the rails, like huge steel horses bridled with long tubes; and of the gliding flight of aeroplanes, the sound of whose screw is like the flapping of flags in the applause of an enthusiastic crowd.

"To admire an old picture is to pour out sensitive-

ness into a funeral urn, instead of casting it forward in violent gushes of creation and action. . . . Set fire to the shelves of libraries! Deviate the course of the canals to flood the cellars of the museums! Oh! may the glorious canvasses drift helplessly! Seize pickaxes and hammers! Sap the foundations of the venerable cities!

"Look at us! Our heart does not feel the slightest weariness! For it is fed with fire, hatred and speed! . . . That surprises you? It is because you do not remember even having lived! We stand upon the summit of the world and once more we cast our challenge to the stars!"

What is as conspicuous in the quoted passages as the ideas themselves is the bombastic accent, the false rhetoric with its countless exclamation marks. Instead of power one feels in them only an hysterical "will to power" which asserts itself through a ruthless negation, as well as through the cult of those very elements of modern life which display aggressiveness, violence, and a purely quantitative external strength—the strength of speed and of the machine. The ideas are of course second hand. So much so that it is even unnecessary to mention their sources. Yet underneath it all one can detect a few traits and tendencies worth discussing even after the span of time which separates us from the futurist manifestoes.

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III

One of such outstanding features is the brutal affirmation of the masculine as against the feminine principle in art and literature, and this is more important than it looks. For there is no doubt that both literature and art in Europe have been largely dominated (since the beginning of the romantic era) by the "feminine" impulse. Hence their anti-intellectual, that is, emotional, sensuous and "musical" character, full of refined nerves on the one hand, and of an exaggerated interest in adultery and sex on the other. Hence also the passivity of so many artists—the tender passivity of natures who are unable to cope with the hard realities and are therefore on the look-out for "ivory towers" which would shelter them from life. A kind of collective "mother-complex" seems to hover over a large area of modern sensibility, and the reaction against it on the part of the futurists has been salutary, in spite of all its extravagances.¹ Unfortunately, they have made the mistake of emphasizing the opposite, i.e., the masculine principle with an equal or even greater one-sidedness.

This in itself is enough to put one on one's guard: to make one suspect that the futurists were in essence but romantic decadents who wanted to overcome their decadence by a reversal of everything from

¹ The most remarkable switch in the direction of the "masculine" impulse is noticeable in the literature of the Soviet Russia.

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which they themselves suffered together with their age. Herein we may find, perhaps, even an explanation of their creative poverty. For the exaggerated masculine principle in culture leads to the same sterility as an exclusive emphasis on the feminine element, and is moreover considerably less "interesting", less subtle. And is not a negation of cultural traditions in itself a sign of fear, of impotence? Those individuals only who are unable to digest the past and to overcome it through a creative effort of their own, are likely to turn with all the greater violence against that past the more they are oppressed by its wealth. Unable to find an adequate strength to master it, they instinctively wish to turn it into a *tabula rasa*.

Such was the actual aim of Marinetti and his colleagues when they began to preach that it was enough to rebel against the traditions and destroy all *passéisme* in order to secure a great, an intense future.

IV

The fact that futurism enjoyed a particular vogue in Italy is in itself significant, because it raises, from a wider angle, the question of cultural inheritance. Of all European countries Italy can boast of a greater cultural heritage than she is able to assimilate for her further creative efforts. Her present seems to be poor from her very wealth—the wealth of the past. While suffocating under its weight, she is still too

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much fascinated by it not to sponge on her past at the expense of her future. To reject such "sponging" does not mean however to reject cultural continuity. It is precisely in this context that the relationship between the past and the future becomes very complicated. But instead of facing these complications, Marinetti shirked them and made a short cut towards a brutally "simplified" type of man and of culture.

Confusing novelty with originality, and vitality with aggressiveness, he debased not only the idea of artistic creation, but also that of the human Ego, which he reduced to its primitive biological and zoological impulses. Instead of integrating the chaotic modern consciousness, he only lowered it deliberately and dogmatically. An apotheosis of the aggressive male on the one hand, and of the aggressive nation or state¹ on the other; the exaltation of quantitative mechanical achievements, as well as the worship of sport for its own sake, of speed and of the machine—such were the elements necessary for the futurist conception of man and life.

Like the romantics of old, the futurists too indulged in simplifications, but whereas the romantics fled (from a hated present) back to the past, the futurists volunteered for an "intensified" future. Their cry for speed—for a greater and greater speed—and their

¹ A few ingredients of futurism can also be traced in the Italian *fascismo*.

chase for novelty was also prompted by a hectic desire to escape from the present. A further analysis shows that the very essence of futurism contains a romantic kernel, in spite of its surface negation of all romantic elements. It is largely based on Bergson's irrational idea of "flux" and of "creative evolution", interpreted in a purely external mechanical way, as the St. Vitus dance of modern speed.

Art itself was identified by Marinetti as speed and novelty. But as each novelty can only be momentary in a life looked upon as speed, such an idea of art actually abolishes art and substitutes for it something entirely different. Besides, when it comes to artistic creation, the futurists only illustrate through their works their own ready-made theories of art. Moreover, like the æsthetes they confuse the plane of art with the plane of life, but from the other end: if the æsthetes wanted to impose art upon life, the futurists were even more anxious to impose life upon art by means of mixing up both. In a manifesto signed by the principal futurist painters we read the following declaration:

"With the desire to interpret the æsthetic emotions by blending, so to speak, the painted canvas with the soul of the spectator, we have declared that the latter *must in future be placed in the centre of the picture*. . . . If we paint the phases of a riot, the crowd bustling with uplifted fists and noisy onslaughts of

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cavalry are translated upon the canvas in sheaves of lines corresponding with all the conflicting forces, following the general law of the picture. These *force-lines* must encircle and involve the spectator so that he will in a manner be forced to struggle himself with the persons in the picture. . . . The public must also be convinced that in order to understand æsthetic sensations to which one is not accustomed, it is necessary to forget entirely one's intellectual culture, not in order to *assimilate* the work of art, but *to deliver one's self up to it* heart and soul."

VI

Such a confusion of art and life on the part of the futurists is, however, trifling if compared with their ominous substitution of mechanical civilization for culture. Owing to Oswald Spengler's cheap generalizations (in his *Decline of the West*), the distinction between the two is now a commonplace, although it was first made, not by Spengler, but by the German savant F. A. Wolf (of Homeric fame) at least a hundred years before him. Spengler's conclusion that after its period of maturity each culture is bound to pass into mere civilization, can be replaced with a greater amount of logic by the statement that culture and civilization co-exist as two complementary and yet antagonistic factors (like soul and body in an individual); and that the afore-

mentioned transition takes place only when the balance between the two has been destroyed by a much too accelerated development of the purely mechanical factors of life. Now the problem our age has to face is not Spengler's dogmatic fatalism, but the question as to whether there are any means and ways of *consciously* regulating, or restoring, that balance between the elements of culture and of civilization, which in less complicated ages took care of itself unconsciously. Such a problem becomes urgent, since both America and Europe have practically destroyed culture by an excess of external mechanical civilization run amok.

What then can be more indicative than the attempt of the futurists to transfer the whole of art and literature from the plane of culture to the plane of such a civilization! The attempt was new in its deliberateness and intolerant exclusiveness. Apart from this, however, they have added nothing new to our inventory. Even their "new" poetry, glorifying the machines, masses and factories, can be found long before them—in Walt Whitman. Whatever elements the futurists may have taken from Whitman, that inwardness of his which Jules Romains blended (in his *unanimité*) with an almost mystical conception of the group-soul, was inaccessible to them. On the other hand, the ecstatic worship of speed and of the machine has actually degenerated, with some of them, into a

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kind of sentimentality in which the picturesque groves, shepherds and nightingales of old are replaced by power-plants, airmen and factory whistles.

Speed has already been turned into a religion. The next step will be to deify the Machine and find in it a substitute for God (O'Neill's play, *Dynamo*, echoes such fetishism). And to crown it all, a few years ago Marinetti even founded in Italy a "Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Machines". Its highly laudable object seems to be to watch that "poor old machines", which are no longer able to earn their living, should not be treated in the same rough way in which their human operators are usually treated, once they have reached the same age and the same degree of decrepitude.

However grotesque this touch may be, it shows that futurism itself has become senile and a matter of the past.

THE CONSCIENCE OF A
SMALL NATION

THE CONSCIENCE OF A SMALL NATION

(ON IVAN CANKAR)

I

A CONSPICUOUS feature of contemporary Europe is the self-assertion of small nations, not only in politics, but also in culture. Judging by some of their achievements they are entitled to more attention than they obtain. Does not the small Norwegian nation hold a post of honour in European letters? The efforts of the Danes, Czechs, Finns and several others are also far from negligible. There is, perhaps, a certain advantage in a country being so small as to be unable to afford commercialization on a wide scale; which means that owing to its very poverty it is compelled to concentrate on quality instead of quantity.

Things are however more difficult when a nation has dwindled to a size which does not secure it either sufficient means for the present, or a guarantee for the future. On the other hand, it is all the more remarkable when such a nation can show cultural achievements quite out of proportion with its size. And this is the case with the Slovenes who are one

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of the tiniest national units in Europe, since they hardly exceed a million and a half. Two of their great names deserve a particular mention: one is their national poet Fran Presheren (1800-49), and the other, the more recent author, Ivan Cankar (pronounced Tsankar, 1876-1918) whose works have already drawn the attention of Europe and have been translated into a number of languages.

An author writing for so small a number of readers is doomed almost to remain somewhat provincial. But once he has gone beyond the limits of provinciality, he can make a valuable contribution to European literature as a whole, precisely by revealing to it the soul and the conscience of a small nation. All this Ivan Cankar has done. His work like a mirror reflects his nation in some of its most peculiar and tragic aspects—on the background of poverty and of a desperate hand-to-mouth existence of which he himself had had more than his share. A penniless student in his native country, a literary Bohemian in Vienna, a free-lance author struggling all the time to keep the wolf from the door and yet rapidly developing into one of the most important literary figures, not only among the Slovenes, but among the Southern Slavs in general—such was the run of his career.

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II

The dilemma Ivan Cankar had to face was a double one: first of all, the fate of a tiny nation in the chaos of the contemporary political and economic struggle; and secondly, his personal fate within the frame of that nation—the fate of a great creative artist, working in the pettiest provincial atmosphere which seemed to exclude beforehand any kind of greatness.

An answer to both problems is given in his novels, plays, stories, satires and polemical articles. And the picture he draws of his nation is often gloomy past belief. What makes it so is not only the heavy struggle for existence, but the general aimlessness, the lack of any hope, of any wider perspective for the future or even for to-day. The smallness of the national body itself seems to be a drag upon its courage and vitality. It saps the will, and demoralizes sooner or later even potentially strong men, who are compelled to witness the farcical party struggles on the one hand, and rancorous servility, backbiting, envy and intrigue on the other.

No wonder that in several of Cankar's works there breathes a spirit of fatalism reminiscent of the great Russian realists who had, by the way, exercised a certain influence upon his style and manner. The gloom permeating his novels, *Martin Katchur* and *On the Hill Top* (Na Klancu) can be compared with Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, or even Schedrine's

Golovlyovs Family. The same gloom comes out in his ambitious and rather subjective long story, *The House of our Lady of Sorrows*, in which the very idea of a contact with actual existence assumes the proportions of a nightmare. While contrasting the dreamy world of crippled children in a hospital ward with the brutal life beyond the window, the author takes the side of the cripples and looks upon each intrusion of the outside reality with hatred and horror.

It was not cowardice that often prompted to Cankar this attitude, but the conviction that in such circumstances a sensitive individual succumbs, not because he is weak, but because his taste does not permit him those tricks and methods by which a victory could be secured. With all the pugnacious disposition which was at the bottom of his nature, Ivan Cankar was too much of a moody Slav to resist the pleasure of pessimism and of despondent sentimentality. But fortunately, he had a powerful antidote to both in his satirical and ironic vein. In this he resembled Heinrich Heine from whom he had learned a great deal also as an author. Whenever he felt too great a danger either from sentimentality or from pessimism, he summoned, like Heine, all the sarcasm and irony at his disposal. And these seemed inexhaustible. His wit and laughter were as merciless, but his sympathy with the downtrodden was deeper than that of Heine.

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The entire first edition of Cankar's "impious" youthful poems was bought by the archbishop of Ljubljana and burned at the stake. But this only made him more aggressive and caustic. His early (and somewhat pretentious) *Book for Easy-going People* fell like a bombshell into the "idyllic" philistinism of the Slovene intelligentsia. So did his plays, *Jacob Ruda*, *For People's Welfare*, *Corruption in St. Florian's Valley*, and *The King of Betainova*—not to mention his other works in which he handled the whip as an expert. For while portraying the conditions of a small nation at its worst, Cankar ridiculed everything deserving of it. And the results were more than useful even apart from their literary value. He cleared the air and forced the younger generation to open their eyes to the conditions around them. He achieved something similar to what Bernard Shaw did in England, although Cankar's laughter is perhaps nearer to the laughter of Gogol than to that of Shaw.

III

The second motif in Ivan Cankar's writings—the one concerning the position of an exceptional individual in a nation which is too small to afford anything exceptional—is closely intertwined with Cankar the satirist and the painter of manners, but it strikes a more intimate personal note. Able but unwanted talents, homeless originals, frustrated active

men—such were the characters into whom he projected his own *ego*. All of them are depicted against the background of a small nation, as its conscience and its living reproach. Some of his heroes give up the fight altogether, because in the conditions in which they are compelled to live there is nothing even worth fighting for: one's struggle becomes a ludicrous caricature. Those, however, who take up the fight, usually succumb; and Cankar is careful to show that their failure is in itself a proof of inner superiority.

So we come to Cankar's cult of the tragic failure; of the capable and ambitious man who finds no outlet in a small nation and therefore feels "like a green twig on a dead trunk". This cult links up Cankar to Anton Chekhov. For he, too, identifies success with vulgarity, or at least with a moral defeat. Indeed Cankar goes so far as to make integrity and success almost incompatible. "What's wrong with me that I have succeeded?" wonders one of his characters. And another actually feels ashamed, as though he were a nonentity, on discovering that happiness is within his reach but for the asking.

IV

This kind of morbid attitude is frequent, and sometimes almost inevitable, in the cramped conditions of such a nation, where people cannot afford to

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be over-scrupulous about their thoroughly rationed livelihoods and careers. But in the teeth of all this, Cankar refused to submit, and continued to fight to the bitter end. The fight he waged was inspired, however, not only by hatred, but also by great love. The attachment to his harassed nation was in essence the attachment of a son to his mother who has fallen on evil days. He may reproach her with sorrow and indignation, but he would never condemn her.

It was this innate love for his country and nation that saved Cankar from utter uprootedness and from despair. Particularly on his return, after a prolonged sojourn in Vienna, to Slovenia, which is perhaps one of the most beautiful countries in Europe, Cankar gradually found a certain poise in his art and in his personal life. The renewed contact with his native soil (whose charm he describes in glowing and deeply felt words) and with the healthy Slovene peasantry gave him a new faith and vitality. Love helped him to see many things in a different light, and with the improvement in his personal fate, he began to cherish greater hopes also with regard to his country. The *via crucis* through which he himself, his characters, and his nation had to pass, was now viewed by him as a necessary trial at the end of which there was not death but a new life.

During this period his talent, too, gave some of its ripest fruits. His sketches, later collected under the

title of *Dream Images* and *My Life*, are among them. He gave up also his early impressionist exaggerations (often grafted upon "naturalistic" themes) and worked out a simple crystallized style; a synthesis of his personal manner and the vigorous laconic speech of the Slovene peasantry.

V

This style and manner had been anticipated in *Bailiff Yerney*—a work which was acclaimed also in its English translation (1933) as one of the great masterpieces. The story represents Cankar at his best. It also shows how a social theme or even "purpose" can be transmuted into art by means of an incredible discipline and economy of language.

The title of the original is *Bailiff Yerney and his Right* (Hlapec Jernej in njegova Pravica) which points to the theme of justice. Cankar takes a particular case, but he deepens it into a clash between the innate ethical and the external legal justice in such a manner as to give it a universal significance. And in order to make the clash more effective, he passes the entire drama through the mind and conscience of a naïve yokel—a figure as monumental in its simplicity as any peasant portrayed by Hamsun or by Reymont.

Yerney, who is the very quintessence of Slovene peasantry, spent all his life building up a farm which

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legally belonged to his friend and employer. His efforts were blessed with success: the farm became large and prosperous. But his friend suddenly died and his son, who in the eyes of the law became the rightful owner, expelled the aged bailiff ignominiously and without compensation. Bewildered and indignant, Yerney could not even understand how such a thing was possible.

“Yerney shall build,” he reasoned in his simple way, “and when the building is finished, the master shall sit by the hearth—Yerney shall be shown the door. Yerney shall plough, and sow and reap, and the crop shall be the master’s, while to Yerney shall fall the stones. Yerney shall mow and thrash, he shall heap hay and straw, and when the barn, the granary, and the stables are full, the master shall lie on a soft bed—Yerney on a hard road. Both will grow old: then, the master shall sit by the fireplace, smoke his pipe and drowse—Yerney shall hide himself behind the barn and die on a heap of rotten litter. . . . Such is human law; and as to God’s commandments, it says: ‘Suffer injustice, Yerney; if your neighbour smites you on the right cheek, offer him your left also; and if he lays hold of your coat, give him your shirt as well!’”¹

Such was the personal wrong of Yerney. Unable to grasp his position, he began to wander from one authority to the other only to meet with ridicule

¹ Translated by Sidonie Jeras.

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and scorn. When at last he turned to the church, the only reply was: "Obey the law and suffer without murmur! . . ." Exasperated by his futile quest, he secretly went back to the farm, set it on fire, and perished in the flames.

In this long story Ivan Cankar succeeded in raising the naive Slovene peasant into a symbol, a pathetic Don Quixote of justice, whose importance is more than temporary or merely local. And so it deserves to be incorporated in European literature, even if its birth took place in one of the smallest European nations.

VI

A valuation of Ivan Cankar from a general European standpoint does not exist as yet, although his talent has aroused attention far beyond the boundaries of his native land. In this summary we have dealt so far with some of his qualities. But we should mention at least a few of his defects.

Cankar's greatest obstacle was the absence of a big cultural centre, and then the fact that he depended on his literary earnings. Poverty compelled him to write many of his things hastily, without giving them enough time to settle, to crystallize. For this reason some of his creations read like able drafts for bigger and more monumental works. His early writings suffer also from occasional sophistications and from

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a much too self-centred moodiness, reflected in piled up "impressionist" devices. But once he had got over this, he developed an uncanny sense for the folk-speech which he blended with the best traditions of the Slovene literary prose. He made also an original use of the "inner monologue", and of what might be called the dynamic syntax; but a discussion of these aspects is quite outside the scope of the present essay.

In conclusion one should perhaps mention also the variety of his work. There is not a single *genre* at which he did not try his strength. And in spite of his haste, he achieved an excellence far above the average. It is idle to speculate as to what he might have given had he not died so young. But the fact that in his short life he raised the literature of such a small nation to the level of great European literatures is in itself remarkable.

SERGEI ESSENIN

SERGEI ESSENIN

(A STUDY IN THE LITERATURE OF REVOLUTIONARY
RUSSIA)

I

RUSSIAN Symbolism was too much of an intelligentsia movement to survive the revolution. It shared the fate of other "bourgeois" institutions. A few members of the group died during the first years of the new régime. Others emigrated. Others again were ousted by new literary cliques and sects, some of which were as shortlived as the theories they rested on. Two currents, however—futurism and imaginism—proved important enough to deserve special attention.

Russian futurism proper began about 1910 with the late V. Hlebnikov's "cubist" experiments upon the language. His adherents grafted upon them various foreign influences (Marinetti, Whitman, Verhaeren), and the result was a provocative medley of native and imported elements. Marinetti's onslaught on *passéist* art and culture appealed to the Russian intellectual and semi-intellectual *déclassés* no less than to their counterparts in Western Europe. It was welcomed by some of them as a veritable gospel to which they hitched their zeal and, when occasion demanded,

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their noisy eccentricities. The movement which had started almost as a joke, gradually assumed the character of a new "storm and stress", directed against all the artistic, social and other values of the past. But the futurists came really into their own during the chaotic revolutionary period. Their leader, Vladimir Mayakovsky, was raised by the new rulers even to the status of a court poet and incidentally a rhyming town-crier (quite an efficient one) of bolshevist ideas.

As for imagism,¹ it developed partly out of the futurist current. It was ushered into existence in 1919 with a manifesto which proclaimed images as the only means and aim of poetry; as something self-sufficient to the extent of dispensing, if necessary, even with logic and coherence. Regarding a poem first of all as a string of original images, the adepts of this current often strained their fantasy to the point of grotesque obscurity and distortion. Otherwise the movement did not show too much vitality. Perhaps it would have remained quite unnoticed but for the fact that it harboured for a while one of the best talents among the younger poets: Sergei Essenin (1895-1925).

II

Essenin on the one hand, and Mayakovsky on the other, are the two dominating figures in the crop

¹ Analogous to, but not identical with Anglo-American imagism.

of poets and poetasters produced by the first decade of the bolshevist régime. Yet what a contrast between these two gifted youths, both of whom ended eventually by suicide. Mayakovsky—a man of as meagre culture as Essenin—seemed to be without any deep roots in the soil or in the people of his own country. He embraced the revolution mainly because it had made a clean sweep of the old Russia and was, moreover, international and proletarian in its character. Essenin, on the other hand, was a typical peasant; a peasant not only by birth, but also by mind, by instinct. Born in the depths of rural Russia, he was so steeped in his native soil and lore that he could never detach himself from them; not even when he deliberately tried to fit into the life of the capital or into the spirit of the revolution.

And so, while Mayakovsky became a herald of the rising proletarians, Essenin was the voice of the peasant and the village—"the last poet of the village"—as he styled himself. It would be a mistake though to regard his rustic poetry from the angle of mere village folklore or *couleur local*. It goes deeper. It might be defined as the poetic self-expression of the "peasant" mind against the encroaching "industrial" mentality of the town. The village with its *essential*, its primeval spirit, sifted through his individual poetic temperament—such was the earliest and also the main source of Essenin's inspiration.

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The village and Russian peasant poetry—a poetry which counts among its names Koltsov (the “Russian Burns”) and Nekrassov—received a new impulse from the symbolist movement itself. After the temperamental, cleverly stylized but often pseudo-folklorist poems of Sergei Gorodetsky, there came new voices from among the peasants themselves. One of them, Nikolai Klyuyev, is quite a prominent figure in Russian modernism. Somewhat unctuous but like a true Russian moujik at his shrewdest when he pretends to be most humble and simple, Klyuyev is worth studying as a type. And he is certainly worth studying as a poet, since his verses breathe of the soil and the village, and bear the authentic stamp of peasantry, even of those patriarchal “old believers” (raskolniki) from whom he sprang. It was this current that found its expression in the poems of the young village lad Essenin, whose fame began with his arrival in Petrograd in 1916.

III

Essenin, too, like Klyuyev, knew how to conceal at his literary début a great deal of peasant shrewdness under apparent simplicity, even under the pose of the “gentle shepherd swain”, all of which was taken for the real thing by the Petrograd intelligentsia. His friend, the poet Mariengof, relates in a book about him that Essenin deliberately used to put on an em-

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broidered peasant blouse (the kind he had probably never worn in the village), a peasant cap and top boots. He also played village tunes on the accordion at the literary parties and gatherings—to the great satisfaction of the highbrows, who thus came into touch with “genuine” people without even needing to leave their comfortable drawing rooms. Essenin made good use of this opportunity for his own purposes, although inwardly he chuckled at his audience with no less amusement than the “little peasant” Klyuyev must have done during his own first steps towards literary fame.

Apart from such comic-opera masquerades, young Essenin was of the stuff real poets are made of. More genuine than his peasant blouses, top-boots and accordions, his first mature poems treat of village themes, of pastoral moods and motives. They vibrate with an instinctive love for his country, which he identifies with rural Russia only. In spite of his calculated experiments in technique (new rhythms and forms), he sings spontaneously, as though extemporizing. He also uses peasant imagery and peasant idioms as one of his chief expedients. Religion, poetic superstition, naive animism and pantheism seem to vie with one another to produce that intimate and yet remote “peasant” atmosphere which permeates the verses of his early period.

This was one aspect of Essenin’s poetry. Its second

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and for a while unrevealed power was of an entirely different kind. It reflected that anarchic and thoroughly Asiatic "breadth" which was perhaps no less typical of the pre-war Russian peasants than their submissive quietism, and which made so many of them restless vagabonds, or else drove them into excess in everything: in piety and sacrilege, in meekness and cruelty, in servility and destruction.

It was this "breadth" that made young Essenin confess (even while he was strumming his tenderest lyrical chords): "I cherish my secret purity of heart; but all the same I may murder someone to the whistle of the autumn wind. . . ." The same unruly spirit was partly responsible for the fact that Essenin hailed the revolution in some of its most destructive aspects. The sentimental-idyllic and the turbulent elements were thus intertwined in him as in a fugue out of which there came some of his most poignant melodies.

IV

Otherwise Essenin's early poetry not only coincides with the school of symbolism, but to some extent belongs to it. It was during the decay of that school that he emerged on its fringes as one of the promising new forces.

Unhampered by education or by literary culture, he relied on the sureness of his poetic gift which made

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him throw about words, metaphors and images, gleaned as it were in the depths of the folk-genius itself. Besides, as a child of the village he was at his best when rhyming in symbols of village life—symbols for which he always found the proper accent, enlarging them at times in a truly mythological spirit to cosmic dimensions.

Even God and the saints are treated by him as inseparable from fields, from seasons, from crops and cattle. God is referred to as a grey elder sowing stars like winter corn. Essenin's rural landscape has the meek eyes of a cow. The dawn over cornfields reminds him of a cow licking her newly born red calf. The moon is a golden puppy, or else a "curly lamb gambolling in a blue meadow".

The originality of his fleeting moods, impressions and descriptions is often due to the way he combines his fresh peasant vision with unexpected metaphors and associations. One of his early poems consists of these four lines¹

Where dawn is watering the cabbage rows,
Splashing red pails upon her mighty jamb,
A little nuzzling maple reaches up
To suck the full green udders of its dam.

¹ This and the next two poems are taken from *Russian Poetry*, translated by Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky (M. Lawrence).

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In another poem he compares the Russian autumn to a chestnut mare cleaning her "rough mane":

Her hooves blue clatter sounds above the bank
Of the still river where the reeds are rank.
The monkish wind steps lightly, and retrieves
With idle fingers handfuls of dry leaves.
And where a rowan blooms he stops to lean
And kiss the red wounds of a Christ unseen.

Out of the many examples the following description may be quoted:

In the clear cold the dales grow blue and tremble:
The iron hoofs beat sharply, knock and knock.
The faded grasses in wide skirt assemble
Flung copper where the wind-blown branches rock.
For empty straths, a slender arch ascending:
Fog curls upon the air and, moss-wise, grows,
And evening, low above the wan streams bending,
In their white waters washes his blue toes.

V

The "essential peasant" was so strong in Essenin that he could not shed him even after he had turned to other themes and interests. While piling up both laurels and disillusion in the two Russian capitals, he still regarded the hut and cornfields of his childhood as his actual, his only home. The revolution itself was welcomed by Essenin in a different way from Blok or Mayakovsky. He hailed it neither like a dis-

satisfied intellectual craving for a renewal of life, nor like a proletarian dancing on the ruins of the old world, but simply as a peasant. It was the turbulent and yet Utopian villager in Essenin that made him write, in 1919, the revolutionary paean, *Inonia*, which may be considered a peasant counterpart to Blok's *The Twelve*.

Inonia is, together with Blok's famous poem, Klyuyev's *Lenin*, and Andrei Biely's *Christ is Risen*, among the most outspoken Messianic affirmations of revolution on the part of dying Russian symbolism, in so far as it is still reminiscent of the latter. More exuberant and therefore less intense than *The Twelve*, it describes the vision of a new world—ruled not by proletarians or by machines, but by peasants inhabiting a free and universal Arcadia. Extremely revolutionary in its tone and language, the poem thus seems to be anti-proletarian in its very essence.

If *The Twelve* may be likened to a disciplined and almost fettered ecstasy, *Inonia* is delirium passing into emotional and rhetorical debauch. Overwhelmed by his own words and visions, Essenin puts into them all his awakened turbulence, his Utopian temper, as well as his puerile spiritual hooliganism. The result is a torrent of verbal hysteria mingled with a would-be prophetic ardour.

"I will shear the blue firmament like a mangy sheep of its wool," he shouts in the manner of a dervish

with foam on his lips. "I will bite through the Milky Way. . . I will raise my arms as far as the moon and crack her like a nut . . . With my firm hand I am ready to turn upside down the whole world. . . . Eight wings are splashing in stormy blizzards from my shoulders. . . ."

As though anxious to drown some hidden fear, he hurls one "colossal" simile upon another. Forgetting the meek peasant Saviour of his previous poems, he yells in a raucous voice: "The body, the body of *Christ* I will spit out of my mouth. . . ." Yet what he offers in the end—apart from his vague Arcadian visions—is his even vaguer rhetoric about a new earth "where the Deity of the living resides", where there is faith in power, and Truth dwells not outside man, but only in man himself. The worn old phrases, yelled in a new fortissimo.

The poem is a landmark between Essenin's early lyrics and his imaginal experiments whose limitations he recognized soon enough. "Imaginism was a formal theory we wanted to affirm", he wrote later, in an autobiographical note. "But it had no ground under it and died, leaving the truth behind that only organic images are of value."

He left the group in due course. But before doing so he had had his fill of scandals, of all the excesses that Bohemian and underworld Moscow could offer him.

VI

Associated with a few equally turbulent literary friends, Essenin was quite willing, in those days, to adapt himself to the humming capital, in which he felt, nevertheless, an utter stranger, almost an out-cast. He did all he could, though, to enjoy at least the society of the Bohemians whom he tried to beat on their own ground. (We are in the NEP period.) Jeering at everything, he walked about with his "head uncombed and like an oil lamp"—proud as it were of his own impudence and hooliganism. Repeated night brawls, prostitutes, criminals, irresponsible marriages and divorces (one of his more or less legal wives was Isadora Duncan), taverns of the lowest description, police stations, hospitals—such was the record of those riotous years of his.

Yet there was despair in his excesses. His buffoonery was that of a sentimental-romantic boy who had made an attempt to "marry a white rose to a black toad", and was now anxious to forget both his failure and his disgust. Essenin's misfortune was that he had been born much too late to fit into the age he lived in. His instincts belonged to another era, and so he could not readjust his nature to any other conditions; least of all to the harrowing revolutionary turmoil. Too sensitive to endure things he saw around him, he would have collapsed much sooner, had he not found a temporary refuge in cynicism, in scandal and in

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taverns. A cynic is often a suppressed idealist. And Essenin certainly was one; particularly when his faith in both village and revolution began to totter. The following poem gives a reliable picture of his moods (translated by R. M. Hewitt):

The little thatched hut I was born in
Lies bare to the sky,
And in these crooked alleys of Moscow
I am fated to die.

No hope have I now of returning
To the fields where I played,
Of hearing the song of the poplar
As I lie in the shade.

The city is senile and dingy
And drab, yet I love it!
The golden and somnolent East
Is brooding above it.

And at night when the moon is a-shining
(A hell of a moon!)
I lurch through the slums till I come to
My favourite saloon.

There all the night through there is riot
And babble and sin,
I read out my verses to harlots
And treat them to gin.

Still fiercer and quicker my heart beats,
This is all I can say:

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"I am lost, you are lost, we are all lost,
I don't know the way."

The little thatched hut I was born in
Lies bare to the sky,
And in these crooked alleys of Moscow
I am fated to die.

Provocative in manner, he became even more so in poetry. At times he paraded obscene expressions which are banished from civilized intercourse. His piled-up images were often laboured and tiresome. Laboured were also some of his propaganda pieces (for example, his longish but on the whole feeble *Pugatchov*) which he probably wrote in the hope of spurring his waning zeal. Some of his tavern poems, however, have a genuine tragic ring, and the intensity of lived hallucinations.

VII

It was during those years of riot and scandal that nostalgia for his lost and therefore poetically embellished rural Arcadia tormented him more than ever. It was very pronounced in the *Confession of a Hooligan* (1920), and somewhat differently in his *Return Home* (1924). The latter depicts the *new* Soviet village which he no longer recognizes, in which he feels a stranger. Even his sister—a fresh peasant girl—now pores, “as if it were a Bible”,

over Marx's paunchy *Capital*, whose pages he himself considers a powerful soporific. The Russia where he had his roots and his love was gone or going, leaving behind nothing except the nervousness of a hectic transition period, and the prospect of a life which was foreign to his simple peasant instincts.

For with all his puzzling ways, Essenin was and remained simple; much too simple both for the age and the conditions he was compelled to live in. Psychologically he had never outgrown the village—the static inert village, and patriarchal owing to its very inertia. On the other hand, the changing village had outgrown him and left him behind. And as for his fame, it only unbalanced him like strong adulterated wine indulged in by a child.

Too sensitive, too weak and self-centred to face the unpleasant realities and to cope with them, he remained hanging in the air. Crushed by a world in which there was no room left for his pastoral ideals, he first took revenge upon life, and then upon himself—through a kind of moral *harakiri*. He revelled in his degradation, in the foretaste of his own doom.

During the last two years of his life he had a few quiet intervals, but it was the quiet of aftermath, of tiredness and resignation. In such moods he was inclined, now and then, to "accept all without craving for anything". But still he craved: for his squandered

youth, for a different life, for the rural Atlantis submerged by the revolution. A last visit to the scene of his early years made things even worse. Instead of recovering his old paradise, he only found there conditions amidst which he felt a walking anachronism. All he could do was to sing his sorrow, or else stifle it in riotous taverns.

With regard to form, too, he now changed once more. Having thrown overboard various "imaginist" eccentricities, he chose for his model the lucid genius of Pushkin. Once more he sang in simple intimate strains. In his *Persian Themes* he even caught something of Pushkin's serenity and insouciance. But that was on the surface only, and only for a while, during his wanderings in the East.

On his return home he was plunged into the former welter of life with all its gaps between fancy and reality. But it was no use drugging himself with wine, women and scandal. He already felt too tired even for that. At the age of thirty he sang like an old man who had nothing to hope for, to work for, to look forward to. Assailed by melancholy, by hypochondria, by disgust and self-disgust, he saw only one way of escape and he took it. A melodramatic touch was lent to his death: he wrote his last poem in his blood.

VIII

Such was the literary career of the poet whose significance would be smaller than it is, if his fate were not symbolic of the difficult transition period between the old and the new Russia; between the patriarchal agricultural life on the one hand, and the industrialized socialist state on the other. The inner conflict involved by such a change found in Essenin's work and life its most pathetic expression. In addition, this conflict—so faithfully reflected in his poetry—may partly explain even his quick, almost miraculous rise to fame during the first three years of the Russian revolution. It was not his revolutionary shouting, but his pastoral nostalgia that found an immediate response in those contemporaries of his who witnessed with regret the passing away of the old rural Russia. If we looked for an analogy we would have to go back to Turgenev's nostalgia for the old "nests of gentlefolk" and the appeal it had on the decaying Russian gentry of the 'sixties and 'seventies. Each period has its own swan-song. The "gentry" period of Russian life found it in Turgenev's art; the intelligentsia period—in Tchekhov; and the old peasant Russia as such—in Essenin.

Essenin's originality lies in his lyrics, and not in his revolutionary verses, although he did his best, even more than his best, to welcome the revolution. But in the end his instincts proved stronger

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than the doctrines he could never quite assimilate. Suspended over the gulf between the vanishing past and the as yet uncertain future, he could not help reacting in the way he did. Suicide became almost inevitable. It is for history to decide whether the whole of the patriarchal Russian peasantry has been, or will be, more successful in its transition between the two eras than was the peasant bard Essenin.

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I

OF all the recent Italian playwrights, Pirandello alone has achieved an undisputed international reputation. Yet the reason of his literary fame is to be sought in his provocative quaintness rather than in exceptional originality or depth. At the first glance he reminds one of the no less provocative Bernard Shaw, whom he resembles by his love of paradoxes, his "cerebral" bent, and his utter lack of sentimentality. On the other hand, in contrast to the optimistic and aggressive Shaw, Pirandello has nothing to preach, nothing to fight for or even to fight against. Disregarding all those social, political and ethical tendencies from which the author of *Man and Superman* draws his inspiration, Pirandello introduces himself at the very outset as a frank pessimist and sceptic. What interests him is human personality as such. And he scrutinizes its riddle through the spectacles, as well as through the bias, of a "modern".

The human Ego, helplessly wriggling in its "flux" (whether Bergsonian, Proustean, or otherwise), in the mazes and contradictions of its own relativity—such is Pirandello's favourite situation. And he intertwines it, time and again, with his two basic themes

which he repeats with monotonous insistence. One of them is the instability of everything human, including our sincerest affections and opinions; and the other, the antithesis between life and its external forms or "masks", as Pirandello calls them.

The region of Pirandello's art is the crossroads where sophisticated scepticism mingles with life as a continuous vital urge and experiment. But Pirandello reduces the urge itself to a mere play of blind forces; to a casual senseless process for its own sake. The majority of human beings are unconscious actors in this play, without being aware of its idiocy. Those however who are aware of it are doomed to suffer. In the best case they resign themselves to a meaningless existence and try to derive at least a certain amount of "amusement" out of their unenviable position.

Belonging to the second category, Pirandello gets all the amusement he can out of the tragi-comic buffoonery of life. But the mental dispositions underlying such a practice can be gathered from the introductory words of his chief character in the novel, *Si Gira* (Shoot . . .). "I study people", he says, "in their most ordinary occupations, to see if I can succeed in discovering in others what I feel that I myself lack in everything that I do: the certainty that they understand what they are doing. . . . No, go your ways in peace. This is enough for me: to know, gentlemen, that there is nothing clear or certain to

you either, not even the life that is determined for you from time to time by the absolutely familiar conditions in which you are living. There is *something more* in everything. You do not wish or do not know how to see it. But the moment this something more gleams in the eyes of an idle person like myself, who has set himself to observe you, why, you become puzzled, disturbed or irritated.

"I look at the women in the street, note how they are dressed, how they walk, the hats they wear on their heads; at the men, and the airs they have or give themselves; I listen to their talk, their plans; and at times it seems to me so impossible to believe in the reality of all that I see and hear, that being incapable on the other hand, of believing that they are all doing it as a joke, I ask myself whether all this clamorous and dizzy machinery of life, which from day to day seems to become more complicated and to move with greater speed, has not reduced the human race to such a condition of insanity that presently we must break out in fury and overthrow and destroy everything. It would, perhaps, all things considered, be so much to the good. In one respect only, though: to make a clean sweep and start afresh."¹

One step further, and we reach the savage nihilism such as illustrated by Louis Ferdinand Céline's recent *Journey to the End of the Night*. In a world like that

¹ Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (Chatto & Windus).

there is nothing even to condemn. Existence utterly devoid of value, that is, of any significance, is even below condemnation. One either consciously resigns oneself to being a "puppet" in the senseless play, or else one hides one's rancour behind a bantering and sardonic surface in the manner of Pirandello. Endowed with a sharp capricious mind, Pirandello is attracted first of all by what is grotesque and cruelly comic. His irony often lingers on that line where it can have occasional trysts with the *Galgenhumor*—a predilection suggestive of an idealist without ideals; of a "bewildered spirit gone astray and unable to find its way again". He knows too much about life to accept it as something worthy of acceptance. And so all that remains for him is to resent, analyse, criticize and reason. He reasons so much indeed as to turn entire acts of his plays into dramatized discussions. But in doing this, he is only too glad to discredit reason itself, while exalting that irrational flux of life which may eventually sweep away all the "fictitious forms around which our stupid daily existence has solidified".

The conflict between life and its fictitious forms or "masks" thus becomes the *leitmotiv* of Pirandello's works. His collected plays even bear the general title, *Le Maschere Nude*—the Naked Masks. And for good reason.

II

The early work of Pirandello consists of realistic stories dealing with Sicilian life, and written partly after the manner of the older Sicilian author, Giovanni Verga. Being however much too individual to remain a follower, and much too brooding to put up with purely descriptive realism, he adopted, before long, a more introspective method which he began to apply to paradoxical and pathologic themes; above all to those dealing with a self-divided personality. His two novels, *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (The late M. Pascal), and *Si Gira*, as well as his numerous *novelle*, show most of the aspects he took up later on—roughly from 1913 onwards—also in his plays. In fact, several of these had appeared previously as stories, now collected under the general title, *Novelle d'un Anno* (Stories for a Year). This in itself shows that Pirandello's "futilitarianism" did not develop gradually, but was inherent in his early things. It was responsible for his method, for his caustic humour, and also for his endless variations on the relationship between life and its "masks".

This relationship can be treated farcically, tragically, and tragically—according to the way one looks at it. Pirandello gives preference to the first two attitudes. Hence his love of grotesquely "funny" situations. In one of his early plays, *Pensaci Giacomino*

(Think of it, *Giacomino*, 1917), the husband, an elderly schoolmaster, not only supports and encourages *Giacomino*—his wife's lover and the actual father of his child—but compels him to return to her, after he had run away. The farcical climax is reached when the indignant husband snarls at the priest who wants to prevent the lover from returning: "You—destroyer of family life!"

In *Il Piacere di Onestà* (The Pleasure of Being Respectable) another Pirandellian theme is worked out. The professional scoundrel, Angelo Baldovino, marries Agata for payment in order to spare her a scandal, since she expects a child from a man whom she cannot possibly marry. The play opens with a sordid bargain, but it finishes with real affection—even with mutual respect of the married couple, a few months later. Or take the conflict between the two friends in *Ciascuno a suo Modo* (Each in his own Way). At the beginning of the play they quarrel because they hold opposite views about a woman. In the process of the conflict, however, they both change their minds at the same time and quarrel again, because each has come round to the views of the other. In *Ma non è una Cosa Seria* (It's not a Serious Matter) Memmo marries in joke the humble drudge, Gasparina, in order to escape the danger of a serious marriage. But as a wife, Gasparina develops into a pretty and dignified woman. When, after some time,

she discloses her true dignity and even insists on a divorce, her husband actually falls in love with her, and his married life becomes a serious matter indeed. Again, in one of Pirandello's later plays, *L'Amica delle Mogli* (The Wives' Friend), we watch the evil which is generated everywhere by the very goodness of Marta—one of the few sympathetic women in his works.

The love of such paradoxical themes is hardly surprising in an author who sees in life mere uncertainty and inconsistency, and in human beings only a collection of grotesque puppets. What delights him most is to tear the masks from his puppets—not in the name of "Truth" as Ibsen did, but simply that he might grin at their tragi-comic antics and grimaces. Yet underneath it all one can feel that his grin, too, is a "mask" covering the hidden tragedy of life and disappointment.

In *Il Berretto a Sonagli* (A Clown's Cap), for example, the respectable puppet Ciampa and the gruesome masquerade of his married life are treated in the style of a farcical comedy. The tragic element becomes more salient, however, in *Tutto per Bene* (All for the Best). In contrast to Ciampa's deliberate life-lie (as Ibsen would call it), the "masks" Martino Lori wears are unconscious delusions. He cherishes the memory of his deceased wife so reverently as to make—years after her death—a daily pilgrimage to her tomb. He

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adores his daughter, respects his learned friend, and is just about to become a father-in-law, when he discovers that the father of his daughter is not he, but his best friend. Everything crumbles down. He tries to act a comedy, but finds it impossible. Finally, in the void that surrounds him, he is saved by another "mask" which becomes a reality to him: through his profound sorrow he wins the respect of his would-be daughter, who now begins to treat him as if he actually were her father. And so everything ends "for the best".

III

In order to see what Pirandello's tragic vein is like we must turn to such plays as *Vestire gl' Ignudi* (Clothing the Naked), or *Enrico IV* (Henry the Fourth). Both are tragedies of "masks". Ersilia, the heroine of the first play, is "soiled with the lowest and vilest filth in the world", but she tries to cover her past with beautiful lies, in order to die at least "in a good dress—something beautiful to be buried in". It is all in vain. After she has been saved from suicide, her "mask" is forcibly taken off her face. The truth about her past comes out, and in despair she is once more driven to suicide, which she now commits without trying (or even without caring) to put on a good moral dress—she dies "naked".

Another powerful variation of Pirandello's *leit-*

motiv we find in his best play, *Enrico IV*. Owing to a fall from a horse during a pageant in which he was arrayed as the German Emperor, Henry IV, the hero of the play went mad, and in his madness actually believed he was Henry IV. Everything in his solitary villa had to be arranged accordingly. After several years, however, he recovered his reason. He tried to cast off his "mask"—only to be provoked to a murder, and to arrive at the irrevocable truth that life would no longer take him back.

"I perceived it all of a sudden one day, when I opened my eyes, and I was terrified because I understood at once that not only had my hair gone grey, but that I was all grey inside; that everything had fallen to pieces, that everything was finished; and I was going to arrive, hungry as a wolf, at a banquet which had already been cleared away. . . ." So he resumed his mask of madness as the only bearable thing—a mask which he now considered no less real than thousands of imposed roles, performed by other people all their lives. "This dress (*plucking his dress*) which is for me the evident, involuntary caricature of that other continuous, everlasting masquerade, of which we are the involuntary puppets, when, without knowing it, we mask ourselves with that which we appear to be . . . ah, that dress of theirs, this masquerade of theirs, of course we must forgive it them, since they do not yet see it is identical with them-

selves. . . . You know, it is quite easy to get accustomed to it. One walks about as a tragic character, just as if it were nothing. . . . (*Imitates the tragic manner*) in a room like this . . . I am cured, gentlemen; because I can act the madman to perfection, here; and I do it very quietly, I'm only sorry for you that have to live your madness so agitatedly, without knowing it or seeing it."¹

Looking upon human beings as unreal puppets, Pirandello reduces also their views, truths, and opinions to equally unreal illusions. Like a jesting Pilate, he makes Laudisi reason in one of his best known plays, *Così è se vi Pare* (You are right if you think you are): "Now, you have touched me, have you not? And you see me? And you are absolutely sure about me, are you not? Well now, madam, I beg of you: do not tell your husband, nor my sister, nor my niece, nor Signora Cini here, what you think of me; because, if you were to do that, they would all tell you that you are completely wrong. But, you see, you are really right; because I am really what you take me to be; though, my dear madam, that does not prevent me from also being really what your husband, my sister, my niece, and Signora Cini take me to be—because they also are absolutely right!"

¹ Translated by E. Storer in *Three Plays by Luigi Pirandello*. (Dent.)

IV

According to Pirandello, the same holds good of any human personality, of any human value. And he resigns himself to such a state of things. Eventually he even welcomes it, in so far as life is identical to him with continuous change and illusion. What he dreads most, is a fixed illusion; a fixed and static existence—in the straightjacket of some “truth” or dogma.

He even condemns art itself—the art which tries (in his opinion) to freeze down the eternally changing flux of life. That is why one of his Six Characters in Search of an Author (*Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore*)—all of them already fixed for good as “roles” of a play—defines his own position as more real than that of living persons. In contrast to the living who change from one day to another, his own reality has been given to him as something immutable, as fixed once and for all by art.

“That is the very difference! Our reality doesn’t change: it can’t change! It can’t be other than what it is, because it is already fixed for ever. It’s terrible. Ours is an immutable reality which should make you shudder when you approach us if you are really conscious of the fact that your reality is a mere transitory and fleeting illusion, taking this form to-day and that to-morrow, according to the conditions, according to your will, your sentiments, which in

turn are controlled by an intellect that shows them to you to-day in one manner and to-morrow . . . who knows how? . . . Illusions of reality represented in this fatuous comedy of life that never ends, nor can ever end! Because if to-morrow it were to end . . . then why, all would be finished."

An even more radical expression of this attitude is the comedy, *Diana e la Tuda* and the repulsion with which its main character, the old sculptor Giuncano, looks upon his own creations. He hates art no less vehemently than Ibsen's Rubek does in *When We Dead Awaken*, and for somewhat analogous reasons. In both cases living life is preferred to art—even by the disappointed creative artist himself.

Pirandello sees life in its "relativity", in change and in change alone. Fixity of any kind (including the one achieved by art) means death and stagnation to him. And so he never tires of deriding it, no matter how respectable and respected its "masks".

V

Pirandello's weakness lies not so much in his frequent repetition of this theme as in his tendency to stun the spectator by logical tricks and arguments. Instead of expressing themselves through action, his characters often express through discussions—not themselves, but their author; or rather, their author's

views and attitudes. Plays such as *L'Innesto* (Grafting), *La Ragione degli Altri* (Other People's Reason), *Ma non è una Cosa Seria*, and even *Il Piacere dell' Onestà*, are crowded with discussions. At times one seems to listen to paradoxical theorems galvanized through lively dialectics into a semblance of life. With all his abilities to visualize the world in terms of the theatre, Pirandello is inclined to reason out his experiences even while moulding them as a dramatist. In *Enrico IV* itself he almost fails to convey the full tragedy, because he reasons too much about it and thereby weakens the artistic effect.

In this also he resembles Bernard Shaw. But whereas Shaw's characters are right or wrong according to whether they agree or not with Bernard Shaw himself, Pirandello's "puppets" are capable of being right and wrong at the same time. Or if their views are right for the time being, they may prove utterly different a few days, a few hours, a few moments later—in accordance with the changed standpoint of the character. The Mephistopheles hidden in Bernard Shaw usually produces in the end his Fabian birth-certificate. In Pirandello, however, Mephistopheles and Hamlet seem to be Siamese twins, and one is never quite sure which of the two is speaking. This makes many of his plays complicated in essence, although they may look simple enough on the surface. A closer scrutiny also reveals their technical com-

plexity, which shows quite a number of literary influences.

The old *commedia dell' arte* had a considerable share in the Pirandellian play. So had the modern *teatro grotesco*, Ibsen (with his retrospective action), futurism, German expressionism, the cinema. Pirandello himself may try to divulge a few secrets of his own creative process (in *Sei Personaggi*); yet any attempt to reduce his dramatic technique to a formula would be misleading, since in this respect, too, Pirandello adheres to no fixed rules. On the contrary: as if lashed by his own "Demon of experiment", he is always on the lookout for new means and methods. What could be more experimental than his *Enrico IV*? His daring *Sei Personaggi* and *Ciascuno a suo Modo*, with their clever "mixing up"? Or even his more recent play *La Nova Colonia* (The New Colony), in which he tries to create a modern myth with the crowd as its actual hero?

One of his outstanding qualities is his artistic economy which amounts, in his later plays, to a bald telegraphic style. His economy in the treatment of subsidiary "puppets" is however less satisfactory. One feels that he concentrates on the main hero too much at the expense of other characters. He also repeats in too many plays the same Pirandellian climax which demands that the hero, having lost all ground from under his feet, should get stripped of

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all his "masks"—in which predicament he can avoid the catastrophe only by means of another, of a new and deliberate "mask"

VI

Herein lies Pirandello's irony with regard to his characters. For he makes them changeable marionettes, not only in the eyes of the spectator, but also in their own eyes. This is how a fictitious marionette expresses himself (in *Sei Personaggi*) about living people: "If we have no other reality beyond the illusion, you too must not count overmuch on your reality as you feel it to-day, since like that of yesterday, it may prove illusion to you."

The European romantics once turned away from real life in the name of illusions which they put above life. Pirandello however makes the illusions so self-conscious and deliberate as to destroy their value even as a refuge. He is disillusioned even with regard to illusions. All he can do is to derive a certain intellectual satisfaction from showing up their play, their tricks and workings. Combining his clandestine idealistic vein with an utterly sceptical mind, he is led by both of them into that blind-alley where the Ego—unable to grow beyond itself—falls back upon its own "relativity" which is bound to destroy all values, all direction, all inner responsibility. Threatened by disintegration, the individual here defends himself

as best he can: either by analysing the puzzles of the human Ego like Proust, or else by reasoning them away like Pirandello. In both cases he remains where he was without ever getting out of himself and beyond himself.

Pirandellian change thus becomes something mechanical and futile: man renews himself by changing his "masks", in the way he replaces worn-out clothes. And since everything is illusion, Pirandello recommends to us to be carried along the stream of life at least on our own (and not on borrowed) illusions and delusions, until we say good-bye to it all. It is a sad philosophy; but after all, "one has to live, that is, to deceive oneself: to let the devilish buffoon act in us till he gets tired, and not to forget that everything passes . . ." Such an attitude was expressed by Pirandello already in one of his early prose-works. And all he has been doing since is mainly to repeat and illustrate it.

In this respect Pirandello belongs essentially to the age in which and for which he writes—an age of social and individual disintegration. His works show an utter severance of life from the value of life, and his inability to unite the two is only matched by his intellectual frankness with regard to himself and others. By not forcing himself into any half-beliefs and "isms" to which he would have to sacrifice his inner integrity, he faces his own void as honestly

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and bravely as he can. And his works are largely a record of that void.

One must pay for belonging to the twentieth century. Pirandello seems to have paid his price fully. But he has also avenged himself—through his art.



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